

# NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

No. 90  
VOLUME 30  
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O'MARA'S ORPHAN

James White

UNDER AN  
ENGLISH HEAVEN

Brian W. Aldiss

MUMBO-JUMBO MAN

Philip E. High

*Serial*

TIME OUT OF JOINT

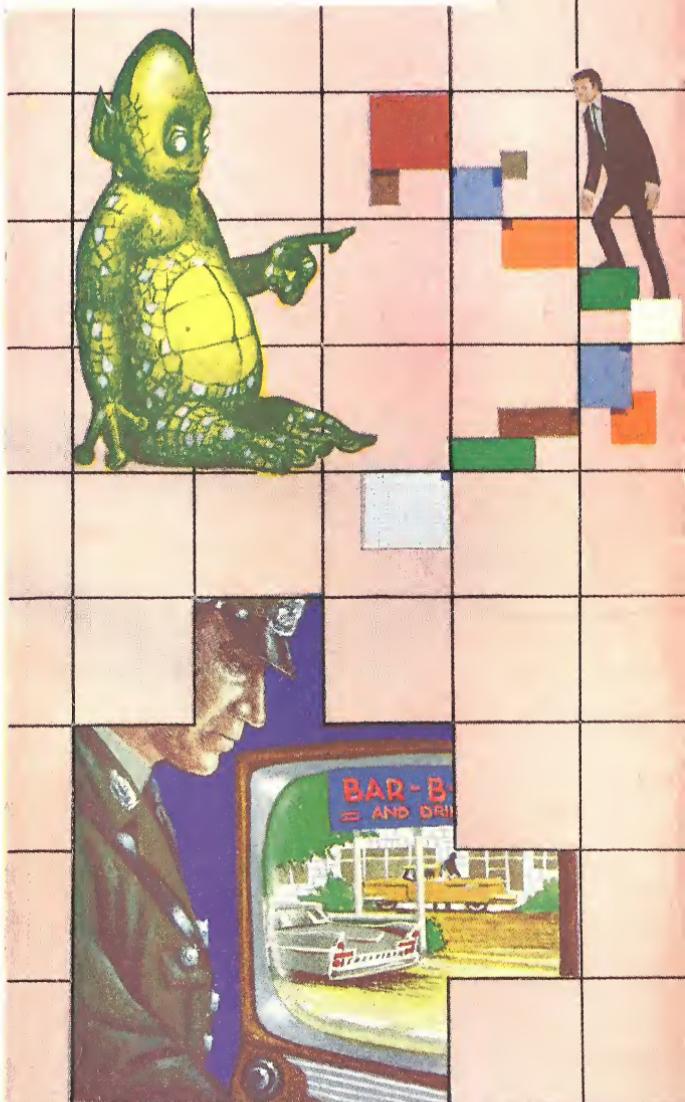
*Part Two*

Philip K. Dick

*Features*

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14th Year  
of Publication



BRIAN LEWIS

# NEW WORLDS

PROFILES



Kenneth  
Bulmer

## Kenneth

Johns

London

John

Newman



In Robert Heinlein's *Universe* you will recall vividly the character of 'Joe-Jim'. Should that be characters? He—or they exemplified the old adage: 'Two heads are better than one.' I—who am a bit of a character myself—believe in that adage, too. I can call at will upon the heads of John Newman and Kenneth Bulmer, both well known to readers of *New Worlds*. Sometimes I have to be a trifle ruthless before sucking their brains dry for another article.

I have to be a subtle operator. Knowing that John Newman is a research scientist, I pick his brains for the scientific facts that, I modestly claim, are correctly up to date with the latest information on any subject. Then I have to drive Kenneth Bulmer into work and, by the time that article is finished and ready for publication, Newman and Bulmer are exhausted and I am anxious to go ahead on the next.

There has to be a method in this combined operation. I know that if I want an article on nucleonics, chemistry, electronics or the strange alchemy of far off stars, I can turn to Newman. If I wish to write on ships, aircraft or archaeology I badger Bulmer. As a result of this combined brain-sucking, my articles have appeared in markets like *Astounding Science Fiction*, *Unesco Courier* and the *Daily Herald*, besides the leading British science fiction magazines. A KJ book, *The True Book about Space Travel* is being published by Frederick Muller.

Perhaps the most welcomed fan letter received was the one signed 'Isaac Asimov.' If Newman and Bulmer can stand the pace, I hope to go on producing articles on scientific subjects for a good many years yet. Speaking for myself, sincerely, I know that a good scientific factual article appearing in a science fiction magazine has to have a touch of imagination over and above an article appearing in the lay press.

Like me, it has to have a life of its own.

# NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

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## TWO SHILLINGS AND SIXPENCE

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# Plot . . .

During the past year there has been a growing tendency amongst prospective new writers to submit plots that are of no use whatsoever to this magazine, and just lately the proportion has risen sharply. This fact sent me searching back through Editorials to see how long ago it was since I last published some do's and don'ts on plot requirements. It was longer ago than I thought—February, 1956, in fact—and apparently a whole new string of would-be contributors have become interested in science fiction and are blithely producing the type of stories they think we are interested in.

Rather than go over the points of that earlier Editorial, let me quote Donald Westlake writing in the September, 1959 issue of the American *Writer's Digest*, in which, covering the mystery, slick, and science fiction fields, he offers eleven Plot Nots in the latter category for writers to avoid. While intended primarily for would-be American authors, they apply just as aptly to this magazine.

1. At the end of the story, we learn that the hero and heroine are Adam and Eve.
2. At the end of the story, we learn that the solar system is really just an atom in a much larger Universe, with the planets being electrons revolving around the nucleus of the sun.
3. Johnnie Smith, aged ten, is lonely because he's different from the other kids. He can lift things with his mind.
4. John Smith stumbles into town with a wild story of Martians who are taking over the bodies of human beings. At the end of the story, it turns out that everybody in town is a Martian.
5. Eight million miles from Earth, a crewman discovers a beautiful stowaway on the spaceship. Captain John Smith, old and gruffy, says, "Eight men and a woman, on a six-month voyage to Sirius. There'll be trouble."
6. A Frank Buck type from Alpha Centauri comes to Earth to get a male and female of every type of Earth animal for the big zoo on Alpha Centauri. At the end of the story, he takes the hero and heroine along for the zoo, and it's a good place for them.
7. It is the year 3000 A.D., and the Time Tourists are receiving their final instructions in the lounge of Time Travel Inc. "Remember," says the guide, "do not try and bring back any souvenirs with you."

## • . . Nots

8. It is a Navy outpost at the South Pole. John Smith, one of eight scientists at the post, rushes in from the outer cold and shouts, "Something is happening to him. He's growing younger!"

9. John Smith, having invented a time machine, decides to go back and kill his grandfather, just to see what will happen.

10. In the world of 2500 A.D., crime is impossible because the police are telepaths.

11. John Smith and the green-tentacled alien stood facing one another, both alone, both unarmed. The fate of the Galaxy was dependent upon the outcome of the struggle between these two individuals.

Author Dan Morgan, who kindly sent along this copy of *Writer's Digest*, adds two more :—

12. John Smith gets the idea that there is something odd about the others in the crew of the spaceship, as though they were not human at all, but humanoid robots. At the end of the story we find that John Smith is a robot.

13. A highly developed technological civilisation is on the brink of testing the Z-bomb. One scientist, John Smith, objects, saying that it will bring disaster. At the end of the story we find they all lived on Atlantis.

There are plenty of others (and readers are invited to send in their favourite Plot Nots—we will publish them in *Postmortem*) but I will only add that we do not use stories that are located in the past, contain bug-eyed monsters, mad scientists, flying saucers, or are based upon presentday power-blocks, atomic wars or post-atomic war civilisations.

As Donald Westlake states at the end of his article, "No matter what any editor says, no cliche is ever dead, and no doubt practically all the ideas I mentioned above will find their way into print sometime in the future . . . if you can take one of these cliches and give it a brand new twist, so it doesn't look the same story any more, you may have a sale on your hands. If you search hard enough in the magazines on sale today you'll find one or more of these variations currently in print."

Which is roughly what I said in February, 1956.

John Carnell

O'Mara has, for a long time, been one of the chief psychologists on board the Sector General hospital out in space—but we have never heard how he obtained the position. James White describes the incident here and also how the hospital was constructed.

# O'MARA'S ORPHAN

by JAMES WHITE

---

one

The alien occupying O'Mara's sleeping compartment weighed roughly half a ton, possessed six short, thick appendages which served both as arms or legs and had a hide like flexible armour plate. Coming as it did from Hudlar, a four-G world with an atmospheric pressure nearly seven times Earth normal, such ruggedness of physique was to be expected. But despite its enormous strength the being was helpless, O'Mara knew, because it was barely six months old, it had just seen its parents die in a construction accident, and its brain was sufficiently well developed for the sight to have frightened it badly.

"I've b-b-brought the kid," said Waring, one of the section's tractor-beam operators. He hated O'Mara, and with good reason, but he was trying not to gloat. "C-C-Caxton sent me. He says your leg makes you unfit for normal duty, so you can look after the young one until somebody arrives from its home planet. He's on his way over n-now . . ."

Waring trailed off. He began checking the seals of his spacesuit, obviously in a hurry to get out before O'Mara

could mention the accident. "I brought some of its food with me," he ended quickly. "It's in the airlock."

O'Mara nodded without speaking. He was a young man cursed with the kind of physique which insured him winning every fight he had ever been in, and there had been a great many of them recently, and a face which was as square, heavy and roughly formed as was his over-muscled body. He knew that if he allowed himself to show how much that accident had effected him, Waring would think that he was simply putting on an act. Men who were put together as he was, O'Mara had long ago discovered, were not supposed to have any of the softer emotions.

Immediately Waring departed he went to the airlock for the glorified paint-sprayer with which Hudlarians away from their home planet were fed. While checking the gadget and its spare food tanks he tried to go over the story he would have to tell Caxton when the section chief arrived. Staring moodily through the airlock port at the bits and pieces of the gigantic jigsaw puzzle spread across fifty cubic miles of space outside, he tried to think. But his mind kept ducking away from the accident and slipping instead into generalities and events which were in the far past or future.

The vast structure which was slowly taking shape in Galactic Sector Twelve, midway between the rim of the parent galaxy and the densely populated systems of the Greater Magellanic Cloud, was to be a hospital—a hospital to end all hospitals. Hundreds of different environments would be accurately reproduced here, any extreme of heat, cold, pressure, gravity, radiation or atmosphere necessary for the patients and staff it would contain. Such a tremendous and complex structure was far beyond the resources of any one planet, so that hundreds of worlds had each fabricated sections of it and transported them to the assembly point.

But fitting the jigsaw together was no easy job.

Each of the worlds concerned had their copies of the master plan. But errors occurred despite this—probably through the plan having to be translated into so many different languages and systems of measurement. Sections which should have fitted snugly together very often had to be modified to make them join properly, and this necessitated moving the sections together and apart several times with massed tractor and pressor beams. This was very tricky work for the beam

operators, because while the weight of the sections out in space was nil, their mass and inertia was tremendous.

And anyone unlucky enough to be caught between the joining faces of two sections in the process of being fitted became, no matter how tough a life-form they happened to be, an almost perfect representation of a two-dimensional body.

The beings who had died belonged to a tough species, physiological classification FROB to be exact. Adult Hudlarians weighed in the region of two Earth tons, possessed an incredibly hard but flexible tegument which, as well as protecting them from their own native and external pressures, allowed them to live and work comfortably in any atmosphere of lesser pressure down to and including the vacuum of space. In addition they had the highest radiation tolerance level known, which made them particularly invaluable during power pile assembly.

The loss of two such valuable beings from his section would, in any case, have made Caxton mad, quite apart from other considerations. O'Mara sighed heavily, decided that his nervous system demanded a more positive release than that, and swore. Then he picked up the feeder and returned to the bedroom.

Normally the Hudlarians absorbed food directly through their skin from the thick, soupy atmosphere of their planet, but on any other world or in space a concentrated food compound had to be sprayed onto the absorbent hides at certain intervals. The young e-t was showing large bare patches and in other places the previous food coating had worn very thin. Definitely, thought O'Mara, the infant was due for another feed. He moved as close as seemed safe and began to spray carefully.

The process of being painted with food seemed to be a pleasant one for the young FROB. It ceased to cower in the corner and began blundering excitedly about the small bedroom. For O'Mara it became a matter of trying to hit a rapidly moving object while practising violent evasive manœuvres himself, which set his injured leg throbbing more painfully than ever. His furniture suffered, too.

Practically the whole interior surface of his sleeping compartment was covered with the sticky, sharp-smelling food compound, and also the exterior of the now-quiescent young alien, when Caxton arrived.

"What's going on?" said the Section Chief.

Space construction men as a class were simple, uncomplicated personalities whose reactions were easily predictable. Caxton was the type who always asked what was going on even when, as now, he knew—and especially when such unnecessary questions were meant simply to needle somebody. In the proper circumstances the section chief was probably a quite likable individual, O'Mara thought, but between Caxton and himself those circumstances had yet to come about.

O'Mara answered the question without showing the anger he felt, and ended, ". . . After this I think I'll keep the kid in space, and feed it there . . ."

"You will not!" Caxton snapped. "You'll keep it here with you, all the time. But more about that later. At the moment I want to know about the accident. Your side of it, that is."

His expression said that he was prepared to listen, but that he already doubted every word that O'Mara would say in advance.

"Before you go any further," Caxton broke in after O'Mara had completed two sentences, "you know that this project is under Monitor Corps jurisdiction. Usually the Monitors let us settle any trouble that crops up in our own way, but this case involves extra-terrestrials and they'll have to be brought in on it. There'll be an investigation." He tapped the small, flat box hanging from his chest. "It's only fair to warn you that I'm taping everything you say."

O'Mara nodded and began giving his account of the accident in a low monotone. It was a very weak story, he knew, and stressing any particular incident so as to point it up in his favour would make it sound even more artificial. Several times Caxton opened his mouth to speak, but thought better of it. Finally he said :

"But did anyone *see* you doing these things? Or even see the two e-ts moving about in the danger area while the warning lights were burning? You have a neat little story to explain this madness on their part—which, incidentally, makes you quite a hero—but it could be that you switched on the lights *after* the accident, that it was your negligence regarding the lights which caused it, and that all this about the straying youngster is a pack of lies designed to get you out of a very serious charge—"

"Waring saw me," O'Mara cut in.

Caxton stared at him intently, his expression changing from suppressed anger to one of utter disgust and scorn. Despite himself O'Mara felt his face heating up.

"Waring, eh?" said the section chief tonelessly. "A nice touch, that. You know, and we all know, that you have been riding Waring constantly, needling him and playing on his disability to such an extent that he must hate you like poison. Even if he did see you, the court would expect him to keep quiet about it. And if he did not see you, they would think that he had and was keeping quiet about it anyway."

"O'Mara, you make me sick."

Caxton wheeled and stamped towards the airlock. With one foot through the inner seal he turned again.

"You're nothing but a trouble-maker, O'Mara," he said angrily, "a surly, quarrelsome lump of bone and muscle with just enough skill to make you worth keeping. You may think that it was technical ability which got you these quarters on your own. It wasn't, you're good but not that good! The truth is that nobody else in my section would share accommodation with you . . ."

The section chief's hand moved to the cut-off switch on his recorder. His voice, as he ended, became a quiet, deadly thing.

". . . And O'Mara, if you let any harm come to that youngster, if anything happens to it at all, the Monitors won't even get the chance to try you."

The implications behind those final words were clear, O'Mara thought angrily as the section chief left; he was sentenced to live with this organic half-ton tank for a period that would feel like eternity no matter how short it was. Everybody knew that exposing Hudlarians to space was like putting a dog out for the night—there were no harmful effects at all. But what some people knew and what they felt were two vastly different things and O'Mara was dealing here with the personalities of simple, uncomplicated, over-sentimental and very angry construction men.

When he had joined the project six months before, O'Mara found that he was doomed again to the performance of a job which, while important in itself, gave him no satisfaction and was far below his capabilities. Since school his life had been a series of such frustrations. Personnel officers could not

believe that a young man with such square, ugly features and shoulders so huge that his head looked moronically small by comparison could be interested in *subtle* subjects like psychology or electronics. He had gone into space in the hope of finding things different, but no. Despite constant efforts during interviews to impress people with his quite considerable knowledge, they were too dazzled by his muscle-power to listen, and his applications were invariably stamped "Approved Suitable for Heavy, Sustained Labour."

On joining this project he had decided to make the best of what promised to be another boring, frustrating job—he decided to become an unpopular character. As a result his life had been anything but boring. But now he was wishing that he had not been so successful at making himself disliked.

What he needed most at this moment was friends, and he hadn't a single one.

O'Mara's mind was dragged back from the dismal past to the even less pleasant present by the sharp all-pervading odour of the Hudlarian's food compound. Something would have to be done about that, and quickly. He hurriedly got into his lightweight suit and went through the lock.

## two

His living quarters were in a tiny sub-assembly which would one day form the theatre, surgical ward and adjoining storage compartments of the hospital's low-gravity MSVK section. Two small rooms with a connecting section of corridor had been pressurised and fitted with artificial gravity grids for O'Mara's benefit, the rest of the structure remaining both airless and weightless. He drifted along short, unfinished corridors whose ends were open to space, staring into the bare, angular compartments which slid past. They were all full of trailing plumbing and half-built machinery the purpose of which it was impossible to guess without actually taking an MSVK educator tape. But all the compartments he examined were either too small to hold the alien or they were open in one direction to space. O'Mara swore with restraint but great feeling, pushed himself out to one of the ragged edges of his tiny domain and glared around him.

Above, below and all around him out to a distance of ten miles floated pieces of hospital, invisible except for the bright

blue lights scattered over them as a warning to ship traffic in the area. It was a little like being at the centre of a dense globular star cluster, O'Mara thought, and rather beautiful if you were in a mood to appreciate it. He wasn't, because on most of those floating sub-assemblies there were pressor-beam men on watch, placed there to fend off sections which threatened to collide. These men would see and report it to Caxton if O'Mara took his baby alien outside even for feeding.

The only answer apparently, he told himself disgustedly as he retraced his way, was nose-plugs.

Inside the lock he was greeted by a noise like a tinny fog-horn. It blared out in long, discordant blasts with just enough interval in between to make him dread the arrival of the next one. Investigation revealed bare patches of hide showing through the last coat of food, so presumably his little darling was hungry again. O'Mara went for the sprayer.

When he had about three square yards covered there was an interruption. Dr. Pelling arrived.

The project doctor took off his helmet and gauntlets only, flexed the stiffness out of his fingers and growled, "I believe you hurt your leg. Let's have a look."

Pelling could not have been more gentle as he explored O'Mara's injured leg, but what he was doing was plainly a duty rather than an act of friendship. His voice was reserved as he said, "Severe bruising and a couple of pulled tendons is all—you were lucky. Rest. I'll give you some stuff to rub on it. Have you been redecorating?"

"What . . . ?" began O'Mara, then saw where the doctor was looking. "That's food compound. The little so-and-so kept moving while I was spraying it. But speaking of the youngster, can you tell me—"

"No, I can't," said Pelling. "My brain is overloaded enough with the ills and remedies of my own species without my trying to stuff it with FROB physiology tapes. Besides, they're tough—nothing *can* happen to them!" He sniffed loudly and made a face. "Why don't you keep it outside?"

"Certain people are too soft-hearted," O'Mara replied bitterly. "They are horrified by such apparent cruelties as lifting kittens by the scruff of the neck . . ."

"Humph," said the doctor, looking almost sympathetic. "Well, that's your problem. See you in a couple of weeks."

"Wait!" O'Mara called urgently, hobbling after the doctor with one empty trouser leg flapping. "What if some-

thing does happen? And there has to be rules about the care and feeding of these things, simple rules. You can't just leave me to . . . to . . ."

"I see what you mean," said Pelling. He looked thoughtful for a moment, then went on, "There's book kicking around my place somewhere, a sort of Hudlarian first aid handbook. But it's printed in Universal . . ."

"I read Universal," said O'Mara.

Pelling looked surprised. "Bright boy. All right, I'll send it over." He nodded curtly and left.

O'Mara closed the bedroom door in the hope that this might cut down the intensity of the food smell, then lowered himself carefully into the living room couch for what he told himself was a well-deserved rest. He settled his leg so that it ached almost comfortably and began trying to talk himself into an acceptance of the situation. The best he could achieve was a seething, philosophical calm.

But he was so weary that even the effort of feeling angry became too much for him. His eyelids dropped and a warm deadness began creeping up from his hands and feet. O'Mara sighed, wriggled, and prepared to sleep . . .

The sound which blasted him out of his couch had the strident, authoritative urgency of all the alarm sirens that ever were and a volume which threatened to blow the bedroom door off its runners. O'Mara grabbed instinctively for his spacesuit, dropped it with a curse as he realised what was happening, then went for the sprayer.

Junior was hungry again . . . !

During the eighteen hours which followed it was brought home to O'Mara how much he did not know about infant Hudlarians. He had spoken many times to its parents via Translator, and the baby had been mentioned often, but somehow they had not spoken of the important things. Sleep, for instance.

Judging from recent observation and experience, infant FROBs did not sleep. In the all too short intervals between feeds they blundered around the bedroom smashing all items of furniture which were not metal and bolted down—and these they bent beyond recognition or usefulness—or they huddled in a corner knotting and unknotting their tentacles. Probably this sight of a baby doing the equivalent of playing with its fingers would have brought coos of delight from an

adult Hudlarian, but it merely made O'Mara sick and cross-eyed.

And every two hours, plus or minus a few minutes, he had to feed the brute. If he was lucky it lay quiet, but more often he had to chase it around with the sprayer. Normally FROBs of this age were too weak to move about—but that was under Hudlar's crushing gravity-pull and pressure. Here in conditions which were to it less than one quarter-G, the infant Hudlarian could move. And it was having fun.

O'Mara wasn't : his body felt like a thick, clumsy sponge saturated with fatigue. After each feed he dropped onto the couch and let his bone-weary body dive blindly into unconsciousness. He was so utterly and completely spent, he told himself after every spraying, that he could not possibly hear the brute the next time it complained—he would be too deeply out. But always that blaring, discordant foghorn jerked him at least half awake and sent him staggering like a drunken puppet through the motions which would end that horrible, mind-wrecking din.

After nearly thirty hours of it O'Mara knew he couldn't take much more. Whether the infant was collected in two days or two months the result as far as he was concerned would be the same ; he would be a raving lunatic. Unless in a weak moment he took a walk outside without his suit. Pelling would never have allowed him to be subjected to this sort of punishment, he knew, but the doctor was an ignoramus where the FROB life-form was concerned. And Caxton, only a little less ignorant, was the simple, direct type who delighted in this sort of violent practical joke, especially when he considered that the victim deserved everything he got.

But just suppose the section chief was a more devious character than O'Mara had suspected ? Suppose he knew exactly what he was sentencing him to by leaving the infant Hudlarian in his charge ? O'Mara cursed tiredly, but he had been at it so constantly for the last ten or twelve hours that bad language had ceased to be an emotional safety valve. He shook his head angrily in a vain attempt to dispel the weariness which clogged his brain.

Caxton wasn't going to get away with it.

He was the strongest man on the whole project, O'Mara knew, and his reserves of strength must be considerable. All this fatigue and nervous twitching was simply in his mind,

he told himself insistently, and a couple of days with practically no sleep meant nothing to his tremendous physique—even after the shaking up he'd received in the accident. And anyway, the present situation with the infant couldn't get any worse, so it must soon begin to improve. He would beat them yet, he swore. Caxton would not drive him mad, or even to the point of calling for help.

This was a challenge, he insisted with weary determination. Up to now he had bemoaned the fact that no job had fully exploited his capabilities. Well, this was a problem which would tax both his physical stamina and deductive processes to the limit. An infant had been placed in his charge and he intended taking care of it whether it was here for two weeks or two months. What was more, he was going to see that the kid was a credit to him when its foster parents arrived . . .

After the forty-eighth hour of the infant FROB's company and the fifty-seventh since he had had a good sleep, such illogical and somewhat maudlin thinking did not seem strange to O'Mara at all.

Then abruptly there came a change in what O'Mara had accepted as the order of things. The FROB after complaining, was fed, and refused to shut up !

O'Mara's first reaction was a feeling of hurt surprise ; this was against the *rules*. They cried, you fed them, they stopped crying—at least for a while. This was so unfair that it left him too shocked and helpless to react.

The noise was bedlam, with variations. Long, discordant blasts of sound beat over him. Sometimes the pitch and volume varied in an insanely arbitrary manner and at others it had a grinding, staccato quality as if broken glass had got into its vocal gears. There were intervals of quiet, varying between two seconds and half a minute, during which O'Mara cringed waiting for the next blast. He stuck it for as long as he could—a matter of ten minutes or so—then he dragged his leaden body off the couch again.

"What the blazes is *wrong* with you ?" O'Mara roared against the din. The FROB was thoroughly covered by food compound so it couldn't be hungry.

Now that the infant had seen him the volume and urgency of its cries increased. The external, bellows-like flap of muscle on the infant's back—used for sound production only, the

FROBs being non-breathers—continued swelling and deflating rapidly. O'Mara jammed the palms of his hands against his ears, an action which did no good at all, and yelled, "*Shut up!*"

He knew that the recently orphaned Hudlarian must still be feeling confused and frightened, that the mere process of feeding it could not possibly fulfill all of its emotional needs—he knew all this and felt a deep pity for the being. But these feelings were in some quiet, sane and civilised portion of his mind and divorced from all the pain and weariness and frightful onslaughts of sound currently torturing his body. He was really two people, and while one of him knew the reason for the noise and accepted it the other—the purely physical O'Mara—reacted instinctively and viciously to stop it.

"*Shut up! SHUT UP!*" screamed O'Mara, and started swinging with his fists and feet.

Miraculously, after about ten minutes of it, the Hudlarian stopped crying.

O'Mara returned to the couch shaking. For those ten minutes he had been in the grip of a murderous, uncontrollable rage. He had punched and kicked savagely until the pain from his hands and injured leg forced him to stop using those members, but he had gone on kicking and screeching invective with the only other weapons left to him, his good leg and tongue. The sheer viciousness of what he had done shocked and sickened him.

It was no good telling himself that the Hudlarian was tough and might not have felt the beating ; the infant had stopped crying so he must have got through to it somehow. Admittedly Hudlarians were hard and tough, but this was a baby and babies had weak spots. Human babies, for instance, had a very soft spot on the top of their heads . . .

When O'Mara's utterly exhausted body plunged into sleep his last coherent thought was that he was the dirtiest, lowest louse that had ever been born.

Sixteen hours later he awoke. It was a slow, natural process which brought him barely above the level of unconsciousness. He had a brief feeling of wonder at the fact that the infant was not responsible for waking him before he drifted back to sleep again. The next time he wakened was five hours later and to the sound of Waring coming through the airlock.

"Dr. P-Pelling asked me to bring this," he said, tossing O'Mara a small book. "And I'm not doing you a favour, understand—it's just that he said it was for the good of the youngster. How is it doing?"

"Sleeping," said O'Mara.

Waring moistened his lips. "I'm-I'm supposed to check. C-C-Caxton says so."

"Ca-Ca-Caxton would," mimicked O'Mara.

He watched the other silently as Waring's face grew a deeper red. Waring was a thin young man, sensitive, not very strong, and the stuff of which heroes were made. On his arrival O'Mara had been overwhelmed with stories about this tractor-beam operator. There had been an accident during the fitting of a power pile and Waring had been trapped in a section which was inadequately shielded. But he had kept his head and, following instructions radioed to him from an engineer outside, had managed to avert a slow atomic explosion which nevertheless would have taken the lives of everyone in his section. He had done this while all the time fully convinced that the level of radiation in which he worked would, in a few hours time, certainly cause his death.

But the shielding had been more effective than had been thought and Waring did not die. The accident had left its mark on him, however, they told O'Mara. He had blackouts, he stuttered, his nervous system had been subtly affected, they said, and there were other things which O'Mara himself would see and was urged to ignore. Because Waring had saved all their lives and for that he deserved special treatment. That was why they made way for him wherever he went, let him win all fights, arguments and games of skill or chance, and generally kept him wrapped in a swathe of sentimental cottonwool.

And that was why Waring was a spoiled, insufferable, simpering brat.

Watching his white-lipped face and clenched fists, O'Mara smiled. He had never let Waring win at anything if he could possibly help it, and the first time the tractor-beam man had started a fight with him had also been the last. Not that he had hurt him, he had been just tough enough to demonstrate that fighting O'Mara was not a good idea.

"Go in and have a look," O'Mara said eventually. "Do what Ca-Ca-Caxton says."

They went in, observed the gently twitching infant briefly and came out. Stammering, Waring said that he had to go and headed for the airlock. He didn't often stutter these days, O'Mara knew; probably he was scared the subject of the accident would be brought up.

"Just a minute," said O'Mara. "I'm running out of food compound, will you bring—"

"G-get it yourself!"

O'Mara stared at him until Waring looked away, then he said quietly, "Caxton can't have it both ways. If this infant has to be cared for so thoroughly that I'm not allowed to either feed or keep it in airless conditions, it would be negligence on my part to go away and leave it for a couple of hours to get food. Surely you see that. The Lord alone knows what harm the kid might come to if it was left alone. I've been made responsible for this infant's welfare so I insist . . ."

"B-b-but it won't—"

"It only means an hour or so of your rest period every second or third day," said O'Mara sharply. "Cut the belly-aching. And stop sputtering at me, you're old enough to talk properly."

Waring's teeth came together with a click. He took a deep, shuddering breath then with his jaws still clenched furiously together he exhaled. The sound was like an airlock valve being cracked. He said:

"It . . . will . . . take . . . all of . . . my next two rest periods. The FROB quarters . . . where the food is kept . . . are being fitted to the main assembly the day after tomorrow. The food compound will have to be transferred before then."

"See how easy it is when you try," said O'Mara, grinning. "You were a bit jerky at first there, but I understood every word. You're doing fine. And by the way, when you're stacking the food tanks outside the airlock will you try not to make too much noise in case you wake the baby?"

For the next two minutes Waring called O'Mara dirty names without repeating himself or stuttering once.

"I said you were doing fine," said O'Mara reprovingly. "You don't have to show off."

## three

After Waring left, O'Mara thought about the dismantling of the Hudlarian's quarters. With gravity grids set to four-Gs and what few other amenities they required the FROBs had been living in one of the key sections. If it was about to be fitted to the main assembly then the completion of the hospital structure itself could only be five or six weeks off. The final stages, he knew, would be exciting. Tractor men at their safe positions—depressions actually on the joining faces—tossing thousand-ton loads about the sky, bringing them together gently while fitters checked alignment or adjusted or prepared the slowly closing faces for joining. Many of them would disregard the warning lights until the last possible moment, and take the most hair-raising risks imaginable, just to save the time and trouble of having their sections pulled apart and rejoined again for a possible re-fitting.

O'Mara would have liked to be in on the finish, instead of baby-sitting !

Thought of the infant brought back the worry he had been concealing from Waring. It had never slept this long before—it must be twenty hours since it had gone to sleep, or he had kicked it to sleep. FROBs were tough, of course, but wasn't it possible that the infant was not simply asleep but unconscious through concussion . . . ?

O'Mara reached for the book which Pelling had sent and began to read.

It was slow, heavy going but at the end of two hours O'Mara knew a little about the handling of Hudlarian babies, and the knowledge brought both relief and despair. Apparently his fit of temper and subsequent kicking had been a good thing—FROB babies needed constant petting and a quick calculation of the amount of force used by an adult of the species administering a gentle pat to its off-spring showed that O'Mara's furious attack had been a very weak pat indeed. But the book warned against the dangers of over-feeding, and O'Mara was definitely guilty on this count. Seemingly the proper thing to do was to feed it every five or six hours during its waking period and use physical methods of soothing—patting, that was—if it appeared restless or still hungry. Also it appeared that FROB infants required, at fairly frequent intervals, a bath.

On the home planet this involved something like a major sand-blasting operation, but O'Mara thought that this was probably due to the pressure and stickiness of the atmosphere. Another problem which he would have to solve was how to administer a hard enough consoling pat. He doubted very much if he could fly into a temper to order every time the baby needed its equivalent of a nursing.

But at least he would have plenty of time to work out something, because one of the things he had found out about them was that they were wakeful for two full days at a stretch, and slept for five.

During the first five-day period of sleep O'Mara was able to devise methods of petting and bathing his charge, and even had a couple of days free to relax and gather his strength for the two days of hard labour ahead when the infant woke up. It would have been a killing routine for a man of ordinary strength, but O'Mara discovered that after the first two weeks of it he seemed to make the necessary physical and mental adjustment to it. And at the end of four weeks the pain and stiffness had gone out of his leg and he had no worries regarding the baby at all.

Outside, the project neared completion. The vast, three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle was finished except for a few unimportant pieces around the edges. A Monitor Corps investigator had arrived and was asking questions—of everybody, apparently, except O'Mara.

He couldn't help wondering if Waring had been questioned yet, and if he had what the tractor man had said. The investigator was a psychologist, unlike the mere Engineer officers already on the project, and very likely no fool. O'Mara thought that he, himself, was no fool either ; he had worked things out and by rights he should feel no anxiety over the outcome of the Monitor's investigations. O'Mara had sized up the situation here and the people in it, and the reactions of everyone were predictable. But it all depended on what Waring told that Monitor.

*You're turning yellow !* O'Mara thought in angry self-disgust. *Now that your pet theories are being put to the test you're scared silly they won't work. You want to crawl to Waring and lick his boots !*

And that course, O'Mara knew, would be introducing a wild variable into what should be a predictable situation, and

it would almost certainly wreck everything. Yet the temptation was strong nevertheless.

It was at the beginning of the sixth week of his enforced guardianship of the infant, while he was reading up on some of the weird and wonderful diseases to which baby FROBs were prone, his airlock telltale indicated a visitor. He got off the couch quickly and faced the opening seal, trying hard to look as if he hadn't a worry in the world.

But it was only Caxton.

"I was expecting the Monitor," said O'Mara.

Caxton grunted. "Hasn't seen you yet, eh? Maybe he figures it would be a waste of time. After what we've told him he probably thinks the case is open and shut. He'll have cuffs with him when he comes."

O'Mara just looked at him. He was tempted to ask Caxton if the Corpsman had questioned Waring yet, but it was only a small temptation.

"My reason for coming," said Caxton harshly, "is to find out about the water. Stores department tells me you've been requisitioning treble the amount of water that you could conceivably use. You starting an aquarium or something?"

Deliberately O'Mara avoided giving a direct answer. He said, "It's time for the baby's bath, would you like to watch?"

He bent down, deftly removed a section of floor plating and reached inside.

"What are you doing?" Caxton burst out. "Those are the gravity grids, you're not allowed to touch—"

Suddenly the floor took on a thirty degree list. Caxton staggered against a wall, swearing. O'Mara straightened up, opened the inner seal of the airlock, then started up what was now a stiff gradient towards the bedroom. Still insisting loudly that O'Mara was neither allowed nor qualified to alter the artificial gravity settings, Caxton followed.

Inside, O'Mara said, "This is the spare food sprayer with the nozzle modified to project a high pressure jet of water." He pointed the instrument and began to demonstrate, playing the jet against a small area of the infant's hide. The subject of the demonstration was engaged in pushing what was left of one of O'Mara's chairs into even more unrecognisable shapes, and ignored them.

"You can see," O'Mara went on, "the area of skin where the food compound has hardened. This has to be washed at

intervals because it clogs the being's absorption mechanism in those areas, causing the food intake to drop. This makes a young Hudlarian very unhappy and, ah, noisy . . . ”

O'Mara trailed off into silence. He saw that Caxton wasn't looking at the infant but was watching the water which rebounded from its hide streaming along the now steeply slanted bedroom floor, across the living room and into the open airlock. Which was just as well, because O'Mara's sprayer had uncovered a patch of the youngster's hide which had a texture and colour he had never seen before. Probably there was nothing to worry about, but it was better not to have Caxton see it and ask questions.

“ What's that up there ? ” said Caxton, pointing towards the bedroom ceiling.

In order to give the infant the petting it deserved O'Mara had had to knock together a system of levers, pulleys and counterweights and suspend the whole ungainly mass from the ceiling. He was rather proud of the gadget ; it enabled him to administer a good, solid pat—a blow which would have instantly killed a human being—anywhere on that half-ton carcass. But he doubted if Caxton would appreciate the gadget. Probably the section chief would swear that he was torturing the baby and forbid its use.

O'Mara started out of the bedroom. Over his shoulder he said, “ Just lifting tackle.”

He dried up the wet patches of floor with a cloth which he threw into the now partly waterfilled airlock. His sandals and coveralls were wet so he threw them in, also, then he closed the inner seal and opened the outer. While the water was boiling off into the vacuum outside he readjusted the gravity grids so that the floor was flat and the walls vertical again, then he retrieved his sandals, coveralls and cloth which were now bone dry.

“ You seem to have everything well organised,” said Caxton grudgingly as he fastened his helmet. “ At least you're looking after the youngster better than you did its parents. See it stays that way.

“ The Monitor will be along to see you at hour nine tomorrow,” he added, and left.

O'Mara returned quickly to the bedroom for a closer look at the coloured patch. It was a pale bluish grey and in that area the smooth, almost steel-hard surface of the skin had

taken on a sort of crackle finish. O'Mara rubbed the patch gently and the FROB wriggled and gave a blast of sound that was vaguely interrogatory.

"You and me both," said O'Mara absently. He couldn't remember reading about anything like this, but then he had not read all the book yet. The sooner he did so the better.

The chief method of communicating between beings of different species was by means of a Translator, which electronically sorted and classified all sense-bearing sounds and reproduced them in the native language of its user. Another method, used when large amounts of accurate data of a more subjective nature had to be passed on, was the Educator tape system. This transferred bodily all the sensory impressions, knowledge and personality of one being into the mind of another. Coming a long way third both in popularity and accuracy was the written language which was somewhat extravagantly called Universal.

Universal was of use only to beings who possessed brains linked to optical receptors capable of abstracting knowledge from patterns of markings on a flat surface—in short, the printed page. While there were many species with this ability, the response to colour in each species was very rarely matched. What appeared to be a bluish-grey patch to O'Mara might look like anything from yellow-grey to dirty purple to another being, and the trouble was that the other being might have been the author of the book.

One of the appendices gave a rough colour-equivalent chart, but it was a tedious, time-consuming job checking back on it, and his knowledge of Universal was not perfect anyway.

Five hours later he was still no nearer diagnosing the FROBs ailment, and the single blue-grey patch on its hide had grown to twice its original size and been joined by three more. He fed the infant, wondering anxiously whether that was the right thing to do in a case like this, then returned quickly to his studies.

According to the handbook there were literally hundreds of mild, short-lived diseases to which young Hudlarians were subject. This youngster had escaped them solely because it had been fed on tanked food compound and had avoided the air-borne bacteria so prevalent on its home planet. Probably this disease was nothing worse than the Hudlarian equivalent of a dose of measles, O'Mara told himself reassuringly, but

it *looked* serious. At the next feeding the number of patches had grown to seven and they were a deeper, angrier blue, also the baby was continually slapping at itself with its appendages. Obviously the coloured patches itched badly. Armed with this new datum O'Mara returned to the book.

And suddenly he found it. The symptoms were given as rough; discoloured patches on the tegument with severe itching due to unabsorbed food particles. Treatment was to cleanse the irritated patches after each feed so as to kill the itching and let nature take care of the rest. The disease was a very rare one on Hudlar these days, the symptoms appeared with dramatic suddenness and it ran its course and disappeared equally quickly. Provided ordinary care was taken of the patient, the book stated, the disease was not dangerous.

O'Mara began converting the figures into his own time and size scale. As accurately as he could come to it the coloured patches should grow to about eighteen inches across and he could expect anything up to twelve of them before they began to fade. This would occur, calculating from the time he had noticed the first spot, in approximately six hours.

He hadn't a thing to worry about.

#### four

At the conclusion of the next feeding O'Mara carefully sprayed the blue patches clean, but still the young FROB kept slapping furiously at itself and quivering ponderously. Like a kneeling elephant with six angrily waving trunks, he thought. O'Mara had another look at the book, but it still maintained that under ordinary conditions the disease was mild and short-lived, and that the only palliative treatment possible was rest and seeing that the affected areas were kept clean.

*Kids, thought O'Mara distractedly, were a blasted worrisome thing . . . !*

All that quivering and slapping looked wrong, common-sense told him, and should be stopped. Maybe the infant was scratching through sheer force of habit, though the violence of the process made this seem doubtful, and a distraction of some kind would make it stop. Quickly O'Mara chose a fifty-pound weight and used his lifting tackle to swing it to the ceiling. He began raising and dropping it rhythmically

over the spot which he had discovered gave the infant the most pleasure—an area two feet back of the hard, transparent membrane which protected its eyes. Fifty pounds dropping from a height of eight feet was a nice gentle pat to a Hudlarian.

Under the patting the FROB grew less violent in its movements. But as soon as O'Mara stopped it began lashing at itself worse than ever, and even running full tilt into walls and what was left of the furniture. During one frenzied charge it nearly escaped into the living room, and the only thing which stopped it was the fact that it was too big to go through the door. Up to that moment O'Mara did not realise how much weight the FROB had put on in five weeks.

Finally sheer fatigue made him give up. He left the FROB threshing and blundering about in the bedroom and threw himself on to the couch outside to try to think.

According to the book it was now time for the blue patches to begin to fade. But they weren't fading—they had reached the maximum number of twelve and instead of being eighteen or less inches across they were nearly double that size. They were so large that at the next feeding the absorption area of the infant would have shrunk by a half, which meant that it would be further weakened by not getting enough food. And everyone knew that itchy spots should not be scratched if the condition was not to spread and become more serious . . .

A raucous foghorn note interrupted his thoughts. O'Mara had experience enough to know by the sound that the infant was badly frightened, and by the relative decrease in volume that it was growing weak as well.

He needed help badly, but O'Mara doubted very much if there was anyone available who could furnish it. Telling Caxton about it would be useless—the section chief would only call in Pelling and Pelling was much less informed on the subject of Hudlarian children than was O'Mara, who had been specialising in the subject for the past five weeks. That course would only waste time and not help the kid at all, and there was a strong possibility that—despite the presence of a Monitor investigator—Caxton would see to it that something pretty violent happened to O'Mara for allowing the infant to take sick, for that was the way the section chief would look at it.

Caxton didn't like O'Mara. Nobody liked O'Mara.

If he had been well-liked on the project nobody would have thought of blaming him for the infant's sickness, or immediately and unanimously assumed that he was the one responsible for the death of its parents. But he had made the decision to appear a pretty lousy character, and he had been too damned successful.

Maybe he really was a dispicable person and that was why the role had come so easy to him. Perhaps the constant frustration of never having the chance to really use the brain which was buried in his ugly, muscle-bound body had gradually soured him, and the part he thought he was playing was the real O'Mara.

If only he had stayed clear of the Waring business. That was what had them really mad at him.

But this sort of thinking was getting him nowhere. The solution of his own problems lay—in part, at least—in showing that he was responsible, patient, kind and possessed the various other attributes which his fellow men looked on with respect. To do that he must first show that he could be trusted with the care of a baby.

He wondered suddenly if the Monitor could help. Not personally; a Corps psychologist officer could hardly be expected to know about obscure diseases of Hudlar children, but through his organisation. As the Galaxy's police, maid-of-all-work and supreme authority generally, the Monitor Corps would be able to find at short notice a being who would know the necessary answers. But again, that being would almost certainly be found on Hudlar itself, and the authorities there already knew of the orphaned infant's position and help had probably been on the way for weeks. It would certainly arrive sooner than the Monitor could bring it. Help might arrive in time to save the infant, but again maybe it might not.

The problem was still O'Mara's.

*About as serious as a dose of measles.*

But measles, in a human baby, could be very serious if the patient was kept in a cold room or in some other environment which, although not deadly in itself, could become lethal to an organism whose resistance was lowered by disease or lack of food. The handbook had prescribed rest, cleansing and nothing else. Or had it? There might be a large and well hidden assumption there. The kicker was that the patient under discussion was residing on its home world at the time of the illness. Under ordinary conditions like that the disease probably was mild and short-lived.

But O'Mara's bedroom was not, for a Hudlarian baby with the disease, anything like normal conditions.

With that thought came the answer, if only he wasn't too late to apply it. Abruptly O'Mara pushed himself out of the couch and hurried to the spacesuit locker. He was climbing into the heavy duty model when the communicator beeped at him.

"O'Mara," Caxton's voice brayed at him when he had acknowledged, "the Monitor wants to talk to you. It wasn't supposed to be until tomorrow but—"

"Thank you, Mr. Caxton," broke in a quiet, firmer voice. There was a pause, then : "My name is Craythorne, Mr. O'Mara. I had planned to see you tomorrow as you know, but I managed to clear up some other work which left me time for a preliminary chat . . ."

*What, thought O'Mara fulminatingly, a damned awkward time you had to pick !* He finished putting on the suit but left the gauntlets and helmet off. He began tearing into the panel which covered the air-supply controls.

" . . . To tell you the truth," the quiet voice of the Monitor went on, "your case is incidental to my main work here. My job is to arrange accomodation and so on for the various life-forms who will shortly be arriving to staff this hospital, and to do everything possible to avoid friction developing between them when they do come. There are a lot of finicky details to attend to, but at the moment I'm free."

"And I'm curious about you, O'Mara. I'd like to ask some questions."

*This is one smooth operator !* thought one half of O'Mara's mind. The other half noted that the air-supply controls were set to suit the conditions he had in mind. He left the panel hanging loose and began pulling up a floor section to get at the artificial gravity grid underneath. A little absently he said, "You'll have to excuse me if I work while we talk. Caxton will explain—"

"I've told him about the kid," Caxton broke in, "and if you think you're fooling him by pretending to be the harrassed mother type . . .!"

"I understand," said the Monitor. "I'd also like to say that forcing you to live with an FROB infant when such a course was unnecessary comes under the heading of cruel and unusual punishment, and that about ten years should be

knocked off your sentence for what you've taken this past five weeks—that is, of course, if you're found guilty.

"And now, I always think it's better to see who one is talking to. Can we have vision, please?"

The suddenness with which the artificial gravity grids switched from one to two-Gs caught O'Mara by surprise. His arms folded under him and his chest thumped the floor. A frightened bawl from his patient in the next room must have disguised the noise he made from his listeners because they didn't mention it. He did the great grand-daddy of all press-ups and heaved himself to his knees.

He fought to keep from gasping. "Sorry, my vision transmitter is on the blink."

The Monitor was silent just long enough to let O'Mara know that he knew he was lying, and that he would disregard the lie for the moment. He said finally, "Well, at least you can see me," and O'Mara's vision plate lit up.

It showed a youngish man with close-cropped hair whose eyes seemed twenty years older than the rest of his features. The shoulder tabs of a Major were visible on the trim, dark-green tunic and the collar bore a caduceus. O'Mara thought that in different circumstances he would have liked this man.

"I've something to do in the next room," O'Mara lied again. "Be with you in a minute."

He began the job of setting the anti-gravity belt on his suit to two-Gs repulsion, which would exactly counteract the floor's present attraction and allow him to increase the pull to four-Gs without too much discomfort to himself. He would then re-set the belt for three-Gs, and that would give him back a normal gravity apparent of one-G.

At least that was what should have happened.

Instead the G-belt or the floor grids or both started producing half-G fluctuations, and the room went mad. It was like being in an express elevator which was constantly being started and stopped. The frequency of the surges built up rapidly until O'Mara was being shaken up and down so hard his teeth rattled. Before he could react to this a new and more devastating complication occurred. As well as variations in strength the floor grids were no longer acting at right angles to their surface, but yawed erratically from ten to thirty degrees from the vertical. No storm-tossed ship had ever pitched and rolled as viciously as this. O'Mara staggered,

grabbed frantically for the couch, missed and was flung heavily against the wall. The next surge sent him skidding against the opposite wall before he was able to switch off the G-belt.

The room settled down to a steady gravity-pull of two-Gs again.

"Will this take long?" asked the Monitor suddenly.

O'Mara had almost forgotten the Major during the past hectic seconds. He did his best to make his voice sound both natural and as if it was coming from the next room as he replied, "It might. Could you call back later?"

"I'll wait," said the Monitor.

For the next few minutes O'Mara tried to forget the bruising he had received despite the protection given him by the heavy spacesuit, and concentrate on thinking his way out of this latest mess. He was beginning to see what must have happened.

When two antigravity generators of the same power and frequency were used closed together, a pattern of interference was set up which affected the stability of both. The grids in O'Mara's quarters were merely a temporary job and powered by a generator similar to the one used in his suit, though normally a difference in frequency was built in against the chance of such instability occurring. But O'Mara had been fiddling with the grid settings constantly for the past five weeks—every time the infant had a bath, to be exact—so that he must have unknowingly altered the frequency . . .

He didn't know what he had done wrong and there wasn't enough time to try fixing it if he had known. gingerly, O'Mara switched on his G-belt again and slowly began increasing power. It registered over three-quarters of a G before the first signs of instability appeared.

Four-Gs less three-quarters made a little over three-Gs. It looked, O'Mara thought grimly, like he was going to have to do this the hard way . . .

## five

O'Mara closed his helmet quickly, then strung a cable from his suit mike to the communicator so that he would be able to talk without Caxton or the Monitor realising that he was sealed inside his suit. If he was to have time to complete the treatment they must not suspect that there was anything out of the ordinary going on here. Next came the final adjustments to the air-pressure regulator and gravity grids.

Inside two minutes the atmospheric pressure in the two rooms had multiplied six times and the gravity apparent was four-Gs—the nearest, in fact, that O'Mara could get to 'ordinary conditions' for a Hudlarian. With shoulder muscles straining and cracking with the effort—for his under-powered G-belt took only three-quarters of a gravity off the four-G pull in the room—he withdrew the incredibly awkward and ponderous thing which his arm had become from the grid servicing space and rolled heavily onto his back.

He felt as if his baby was sitting on his chest, and large, black blotches hung throbbing before his eyes. Through them he could see a section of ceiling and, at a crazy angle, the vision panel. The face in it was becoming impatient.

"I'm back, Major," gasped O'Mara. He fought to control his breathing so that the words would not be squeezed out too fast. "I suppose you want to hear my side of the accident?"

"No," said the Monitor. "I've heard the tape Caxton made. What I'm curious about is your background prior to coming here. I've checked up and there is something which doesn't quite fit . . ."

A thunderous eruption of noise blasted into the conversation. Despite the deeper note caused by the increased air pressure O'Mara recognised the signal for what it was; the FROB was angry and hungry.

With a mighty effort O'Mara rolled onto his side, then propped himself up on his elbows. He stayed that way for a while gathering strength to roll over onto his hands and knees. But when he finally accomplished this he found that his arms and legs were swelling and felt as if they would burst from the pressure of blood piling up in them. Gasping, he eased himself down flat onto his chest. Immediately the blood rushed to the front of his body and his vision began to red out.

He couldn't crawl on hands and knees nor wriggle on his stomach. Most certainly, under three-Gs, he could not stand up and walk. What else was there?

O'Mara struggled onto his side again and rolled back, but this time with his elbows propping him up. The neck-rest of his suit supported his head, but the insides of the sleeves were very lightly padded and his elbows hurt. And the strain of holding up even part of his three times heavier than normal

body made his heart pound. Worst of all, he was beginning to black out again.

Surely there must be some way to equalise, or at least distribute, the pressures in his body so that he could stay conscious and move. O'Mara tried to visualise the layout of the acceleration chairs which had been used in ships before artificial gravity came along. It had been a not-quite-prone position, he remembered suddenly, with the knees drawn up . . .

Inching along on his elbows, bottom and feet, O'Mara progressed snail-like towards the bedroom. His embarrassment of riches where muscles were concerned was certainly of use now—in these conditions any ordinary man would have been plastered helplessly against the floor. Even so it took him fifteen minutes to reach the food sprayer in the bedroom, and during practically every second of the way the baby kept up its ear-splitting racket. With the increased pressure the noise was so tremendously loud and deep that every bone in O'Mara's body seemed to vibrate to it.

"I'm trying to talk to you!" the Monitor yelled during a lull. "Can't you keep that blasted kid shut up!"

"It's hungry," said O'Mara. "It'll quieten down when it's fed . . ."

The food sprayer was mounted on a trolley and O'Mara had fitted a pedal control so as to leave both hands free for aiming. Now that his patient was immobilised by four gravities he didn't have to use his hands. Instead he was able to nudge the trolley into position with his shoulders and depress the pedal with his elbow. The high-pressure jet tended to bend floorwards owing to the extra gravity but he did finally manage to cover the infant with food. But cleaning the affected areas of food compound was another matter. The water jet, which handled very awkwardly from floor level, had no accuracy at all. The best he could manage was to wash down the wide, vivid blue patch—formed from three separate patches which had grown together—which covered nearly one quarter of its total skin area.

After that O'Mara straightened out his legs and lowered his back gently to the floor. Despite the three-Gs acting on him, the strain of maintaining that half-sitting position for the last half hour made him feel almost comfortable.

The baby had stopped crying.

"What I was about to say," said the Monitor heavily, when the silence looked like lasting for a few minutes, "was that your record on previous jobs does not fit what I find here. Previously you were, as you are now, a restless, discontented type, but you were invariably popular with your colleagues and only a little less so with your superiors—this last being because your superiors were sometimes wrong and you never were . . ."

"I was every bit as smart as they were," said O'Mara tiredly, "and proved it often. But I didn't *look* intelligent, I had mucker written all over me!"

It was strange, O'Mara thought, but he felt almost disinterested in his own personal trouble now. He couldn't take his eyes off the angry blue patch on the infant's side. The colour had deepened and also the centre of the patch seemed to have swelled. It was as if the super-hard tegument had softened and the FROB's enormous internal pressure had produced a swelling. Increasing the gravity and pressure to the Hudlarian normal should, he hoped, halt that particular development—if it wasn't a symptom of something else entirely.

O'Mara had thought of carrying his idea a step further and spraying the air around the patient with food compound. On Hudlar the natives' food was comprised of tiny organisms floating in their super-thick atmosphere, but then again the handbook expressly stated that food particles must be kept away from the affected areas of tegument, so that the extra gravity and pressure should be enough . . .

". . . Nevertheless," the Monitor was saying, "if a similar accident had happened on one of your previous jobs, your story would have been believed. Even if it had been your fault they would have rallied round to defend you from outsiders like myself."

"What caused you to change from a friendly, likable type of personality to *this* . . .?"

"I was bored," said O'Mara shortly.

There had been no sound from the infant yet, but he had seen the characteristic movements of the FROB's appendages which foretold of an outburst shortly to come. And it came. For the next ten minutes speech was, of course, impossible.

O'Mara heaved himself onto his side and rolled back onto his now raw and bleeding elbows. He knew what was wrong; the infant had missed its usual after-feed nursing. O'Mara humped his way slowly across to the two counterweight ropes

of the gadget he had devised for petting the infant and prepared to remedy this omission. But the ends of the ropes hung four feet above the floor.

Lying propped by one elbow and straining to raise the dead weight of his other arm, O'Mara thought that the rope could just as easily have been four miles away. Sweat poured off his face and body with the intensity of the effort and slowly, trembling and wobbling so much that his gauntleted hand went past it first time, he reached up and grabbed hold. Still gripping it tightly he lowered himself gently back bringing the rope with him.

The gadget operated on a system of counterweights, so that there was no extra pull needed on the controlling ropes. A heavy weight dropped neatly onto the infant's back, administering a reassuring pat. O'Mara rested for a few minutes, then struggled up to repeat the process with the other rope, the pull on which would also wind up the first weight ready for use again.

After about the eighth pat he found that he couldn't see the end of the rope he was reaching for, though he managed to find it all the same. His head was being kept too high above the level of the rest of his body for too long a time and he was constantly on the point of blacking out. The diminished flow of blood to his brain was having other effects, too . . .

" . . . There, there," O'Mara heard himself saying in a definitely maudlin voice. " You're all right now, pappy will take care of you. There now, shush . . . "

The funny thing about it was that he really did feel a responsibility and a sort of angry concern for the infant. He had saved it once only to let *this* happen ! Maybe the three-Gs which jammed him against the floor, making every breath a day's work and the smallest movement an operation which called for all the reserves of strength he possessed, was bringing back the memory of another kind of pressure—the slow, inexorable movement together of two large, inanimate and uncaring masses of metal.

The accident.

As fitter-in-charge of that particular shift O'Mara had just switched on the warning lights when he had seen the two adult Hudlarians chasing after their off-spring on one of the faces being joined. He had called them through his translator,

urging them to get to safety and leave him to chase the youngster clear—being much smaller than its parents the slowly closing faces would take longer to reach it, and during those extra few minutes O'Mara would have been able to herd it out of danger. But either their Translators were switched off or they were reluctant to trust the safety of their child to a diminutive human being. Whatever the reason they remained between the faces until it was too late. O'Mara had to watch helplessly as they were trapped and crushed by the joining structures.

The sight of the young one, still unharmed because of its smaller girth, floundering about between the bodies of its late parents sent O'Mara into belated action. He was able to chase it out of danger before the sections came close enough to trap it, and had just barely made it himself. For a few heart-stopping seconds back there O'Mara had thought he would have to leave a leg behind.

This was no place for kids anyway, he told himself angrily as he looked at the quivering, twitching body with the patches of vivid, scabrous blue. People shouldn't be allowed to bring kids out here, even tough people like the Hudlarians.

But Major Craythorne was speaking again.

" . . . Judging by what I hear going on over there," said the Monitor acidly, "you're taking very good care of your charge. Keeping the youngster happy and healthy will definitely be a point in your favour . . . "

Happy and healthy, thought O'Mara as he reached towards the rope yet again. *Healthy . . . !*

" . . . But there are other considerations," the quiet voice went on. " Were you guilty of negligence in not switching on the warning lights until after the accident occurred, which is what you are alleged to have done? And your previous record notwithstanding, here you have been a surly, quarrelsome bully and your behaviour towards Waring especially . . . !"

The Monitor broke off, looked faintly disapproving, then went on, " A few minutes ago you said that you did all these things because you were bored. Explain that."

" Wait a minute, Major," Caxton broke in, his face appearing suddenly behind Craythorne's on the screen. " He's stalling for some reason, I'm sure of it. All those interruptions, this gasping voice he's using and this shush-a-bye-baby stuff is just an act to show what a great little nurse-maid he is. I

think I'll go over and bring him back here to answer you face to face—”

“ That won't be necessary,” said O'Mara quickly. “ I'll answer any questions you want, right now.”

He had a horrible picture of Caxton's reaction if the other saw the infant in its present state ; the sight of it made O'Mara feel queasy and he was used to it now. Caxton wouldn't stop to think, or wait for explanations, or ask himself if it was fair to place an e-t in charge of a human who was completely ignorant of its physiology or weaknesses. He would just react. Violently.

And as for the Monitor . . .

O'Mara thought that he might get out of the accident part, but if the kid died as well he hadn't a hope. The infant had had a mild though uncommon disease which should have responded to treatment days ago, and instead had become progressively worse, so it would die anyway if O'Mara's last desperate try at reproducing its home planet's conditions did not come off. What he needed now was time. According to the book, about four to six hours of it.

Suddenly the futility of it all hit him. The infant's condition had not improved—it heaved and twitched and generally looked to be the most desperately ill and pitiable creature that had ever been born. O'Mara swore helplessly. What he was trying to do now should have been tried days ago, his baby was as good as dead, and continuing this treatment for another five or six hours would probably kill or cripple him for life. And it would serve him right !

## six

The infant's appendages curled in the way O'Mara knew meant that it was going to cry again, and grimly he began pushing himself onto his elbows for another patting session. That was the very least he could do. And even though he was convinced that going on was useless, the kid had to be given the chance. O'Mara had to have time to finish the treatment without interruptions, and to insure that he would have to answer this Monitor's questions in a full and satisfactory manner. If the kid started crying again he wouldn't be able to do that.

" . . . For your kind co-operation," the Major was saying drily. "First off, I want an explanation for your sudden change of personality."

"I was bored," said O'Mara. "Hadn't enough to do. Maybe I'd become a bit of a sorehead, too. But the main reason for setting out to be a lousy character was that there was a job I could do here which could not be done by a nice guy. I've studied a lot and think of myself as a pretty good rule-of-thumb psychologist . . . "

Suddenly came disaster. O'Mara's supporting elbow slipped as he was reaching for the counterweight rope and he crashed back to the floor from a distance of two-and-a-half feet. At three-Gs this was equivalent to a fall of seven feet. Luckily he was in a heavy duty suit with a padded helmet so he did not lose consciousness. But he did cry out, and instinctively held onto the rope as he fell.

That was his mistake.

One weight dropped, the other swung up too far. It hit the ceiling with a crash and loosened the bracket which supported the light metal girder which carried it. The whole structure began to sag, and slip then was suddenly yanked floorwards by four-Gs onto the infant below. In his dazed state O'Mara could not guess at the amount of force expended on the infant—whether it was a harder than usual pat, the equivalent of a sharp smack on the bottom, or something very much more serious. The baby was very quiet afterwards, which worried him.

" . . . For the third time," shouted the Monitor, "what the blazes is going on in there ?"

O'Mara muttered something which was unintelligible even to himself, the Caxton joined in.

"There's something fishy going on, and I bet it involves the kid ! I'm going over to see—"

"No, wait !" said O'Mara desperately. "Give me six hours . . . "

"I'll see you," said Caxton, "in ten minutes."

"Caxton !" O'Mara shouted. "If you come through my airlock you'll kill me ! I'll have the inner seal jammed open and if you open the outer one you'll evacuate the place. Then the Major will lose his prisoner."

There was a sudden silence, then :

"What," asked the Monitor quietly, "do you want the six hours for ?"

O'Mara tried to shake his head to clear it, but now that it weighed three times heavier than normal he only hurt his neck. What *did* he want six hours for? Looking around him he began to wonder, because both the food sprayer and its connecting water tank had been wrecked by the fall of tackle from the ceiling. He could neither feed, wash, nor scarcely see his patient for fallen wreckage, so all he could do for six hours was watch and wait for a miracle.

"I'm going over," said Caxton doggedly.

"You're not," said the Major, still polite but with a no-nonsense tone. "I want to get to the bottom of this. You'll wait outside until I've spoken with O'Mara alone."

"Now O'Mara, *what . . . is . . . happening?*"

Flat on his back again O'Mara fought to gain enough breath to carry on an extended conversation. He had decided that the best thing to do would be to tell the Monitor the exact truth, and then appeal to him to back O'Mara up in the only way possible which might save the infant—by leaving him alone for six hours. But O'Mara was feeling very low as he talked, and his vision was so poor that he couldn't tell sometimes whether his eyelids were open or shut. He did see someone hand the Major a note, but Craythorne didn't read it until O'Mara had finished speaking.

"You are in a mess," Craythorne said finally. He briefly looked sympathetic then his tone hardened again. "And ordinarily I should be forced to do as you suggest and give you that six hours. After all, you have the book and so you know more than we do. But the situation has changed in the last few minutes. I've just had word that two Hudlarians have arrived, one of them a doctor."

"You had better step down, O'Mara. You tried, but now let some skilled help salvage what they can from the situation."

"For the kid's sake," he added.

It was three hours later. Caxton, Waring and O'Mara were facing the Major across the Monitor's desk. Craythorne had just come in.

He said briskly, "I'm going to be busy for the next few days so we'll get this business settled quickly. First, the accident.

"O'Mara, your case depends entirely on Waring's corroboration for your story. Now there seems to be some pretty devious thinking here on your part. I've already heard Waring's evidence, but to satisfy my own curiosity I'd like to know what *you* think he said?"

"He backed up my story," said O'Mara wearily. "He had no choice."

He looked down at his hands, still thinking about the desperately sick infant he had left in his quarters. He told himself again that he wasn't responsible for what had happened, but deep inside he felt that if he had shown more flexibility of mind and had started the pressure treatment sooner the kid would have been all right now. But the result of the accident enquiry didn't seem to matter now, one way or the other, and neither did the Waring business.

"*Why* do you think he had no choice?" prodded the Monitor sharply.

Caxton had his mouth open, looking confused. Waring would not meet O'Mara's eyes and he was beginning to blush.

"When I came here," O'Mara said dully, "I was looking out for a secondary job to fill my spare time, and hounding Waring was it. He is the reason for my being an obnoxious type, that was the only way I could go to work on him. But to understand that you have to go a bit farther back.

"Because of that power pile accident," O'Mara went on, "all the men of his section were very much in Waring's debt—you've probably heard the details by now. Waring himself was a mess. Physically he was below par—had to get shots to keep his blood-count up, was just about strong enough to work his control console, and was fairly wallowing in self-pity. Psychologically he was a wreck. Despite all Pelling's assurances that the shots would only be necessary for a few more months he was convinced that he had pernicious anaemia. He also believed that he had been made sterile, again despite everything the doctor told him, and this conviction made him act and talk in a way which would give any normal man the creeps—because that sort of thing is pathological and there wasn't anything like that wrong with him.

"When I saw how things were I started to ridicule him every chance I got. I hounded him unmercifully. So the way I see it he had no other choice but to support my story. Simple gratitude demanded it."

"I begin to see the light," said the Major. "Go on."

"The men around him were very much in his debt," O'Mara continued. "But instead of putting the brakes on, of giving him a good talking to, they smothered him with sympathy. They let him win all fights, card-games or whatever, and generally treated him like a little tin god.

"I did none of these things.

"Whenever he lisped or stuttered or was awkward about anything," O'Mara went on, "whether it was due to one of his mental and self-inflicted disabilities or a physical one which he honestly couldn't help, I jumped on him hard with both feet. Maybe I was too hard sometimes, but remember that I was one man trying to undo the harm that was being done by fifty. Naturally he hated my guts, but he always knew exactly where he was with me. And I never pulled punches. On the very few occasions when he was able to get the better of me, he knew that he had won despite everything I could do to stop him—unlike his friends who let him beat them at everything and in so doing made his winning meaningless. That was exactly what he needed for what ailed him, somebody to treat him as an equal and make no allowances at all.

"So when this trouble came," O'Mara ended, "I was pretty sure he would begin to see what I'd been doing for him—consciously as well as subconsciously—and that simple gratitude plus the fact that basically he is a decent type would keep him from withholding the evidence which would clear me. Was I right?"

"You were," said the Major. He paused to quell Caxton who had jumped to his feet, protesting, then continued, "Which brings us to the FROB infant.

"Apparently your baby caught one of the mild but rare diseases which can only be treated successfully on the home planet," Craythorne went on. He smiled suddenly. "At least, that was what they thought until a few hours ago. Now our Hudlarian friends state that the proper treatment has already been initiated by you and that all they have to do is wait for a couple of days and the infant will be as good as new.

"But they're very annoyed with you, O'Mara," the Monitor continued. "They say that you've rigged special equipment for petting and soothing the kid and that you've done this much more often than is desirable. The baby has been overfed and spoiled shamelessly, they say, so much so that at the

moment it prefers human beings to members of its own species—”

Suddenly Caxton banged the desk. “ You’re not going to let him get away with this,” he shouted, redfaced. “ Waring doesn’t know what he’s saying sometimes . . . ”

“ Mr. Caxton,” said the Monitor sharply, “ all the evidence available proves that Mr. O’Mara is blameless, both at the time of the accident and while he was looking after the infant later. However, I am not quite finished with him here, so perhaps you two would be good enough to leave . . . ”

Caxton stormed out followed more slowly by Waring. At the door the tractor-beam man paused, addressed one printable and three unprintable words to O’Mara, grinned suddenly and left. The Major sighed.

“ O’Mara,” he said sternly, “ you’re out of a job again, and while I don’t as a rule give unasked for advice I would like to remind you of a few facts. In a few weeks time the staff and maintenance engineers for this hospital will be arriving and they will be comprised of practically every known species in the galaxy. My job is to settle them in and keep friction from developing between them so that eventually they will work together as a team. No text-book rules have been written to cover this sort of thing yet, but before they sent me here my superiors said that it would require a good rule-of-thumb psychologist with plenty of common sense who was not afraid to take calculated risks. I think it goes without saying that two such psychologists would be even better . . . ”

O’Mara was listening to him all right, but he was thinking of that grin he’d got from Waring. Both the infant and Waring were going to be all right now, he knew, and in his present happy state of mind he could refuse nothing of anybody. But apparently the Major had mistaken his abstraction for something else.

“ . . . Dammit I’m offering you a job ! You *fit* here, can’t you see that ? This is a hospital, man, and you’ve cured our first patient . . . !”

James White

When Brian Aldiss submitted this story, he wrote :—  
“I know this is a pretty tired and worn-out plot, but I cannot remember ever having seen it done with quite the same treatment.” Neither had we—it is a satirical poke at the arrival of the first alien spaceship and probably closer to the truth than we imagine.

# UNDER AN ENGLISH HEAVEN

by Brian W. Aldiss

---

George Hutchinson phoned his brother Herbert at 12.15 on the first of July 1961.

“Herbert? That you? George here. I’m phoning from the *Mail*. We’ve just had a phone call from a bod out Newbury way. Guess what?”

“You tell me, laddie!”

“They’ve made it at last! An alien spaceship has landed just outside Newbury. I’m off to have a look at it as soon as possible. Get Helen and the kids rounded up and I’ll collect you in ten minutes in the car. We’ll be among the first to see the little green men.”

“Now look, George—”

“This is pukka, Herb, no kidding. History starts anew today. This is the most epoch-making day ever. Get your togs and I’ll be round.”

He hung up. On his way out of the office, he barged into the News Editor.

“Keep this story under your hat, George,” Ralph Head advised. “We’ll have to confirm it before we do anything. It sounds like a lot of eyewash to me.”

"Okay," George said abstractedly. "But Gillwood phoned it in. He's always reliable, isn't he?"

Ralph took his pipe out of his mouth.

"Don't tell me you believe the Martians are here?!"

"Everyone knew they'd turn up sometime."

"Well here's one provincial newspaper doesn't want 'em. I've got trouble enough with this shipyard business on my hands."

George drove fast to the outskirts of town, turned up the drive of his brother's house and braked outside the front door. He entered the house clapping his hands and calling "Let's be having you."

Helen met him in the passage, her apron on.

"What is all this nonsense you've been telling Herbert over the phone?"

"No nonsense, honey. A real big spaceship landed only thirty miles away. I'm going to take you all to see it. Isn't it the biggest thing you can imagine?"

"We can't possibly come, George. I'm just in the middle of getting the lunch!"

He levelled an imaginary pistol at his head and pulled the trigger.

"Lunch! You need to eat the day the world ends? Switch the gas off and let's go. Where's Herbert?"

"He's gone to get Frances from school."

"Fine. Shed your apron and we'll drive along the road to meet them."

"But Eric—"

"Look, Helen, Eric's at school all day. You needn't worry about him."

"He'll be back at 4.15."

"Well leave him a note in case we're late and tell him to watch the telly till we get back."

She backed away, shaking her head.

"I've never seen you like this, George!"

"My God, I've never been like this! Now gather your traps like a good girl and let's get cracking."

"And what do you suppose is going to happen to the baby?"

"Use your nous, pet! Shove it in the carry-cot and it can go in the back of the car."

"Susan has to have a bottle at 2.15."

"Helen . . . Helen . . . Where's your imagination, for heaven's sake. Go and get a bottle ready now."

"It isn't so easy—"

The front door opened. Herbert came in, looking harrassed. Frances, aged six, was with him, crying loudly. She let out renewed howls as she rushed into her mother's arms.

"Come on, Herbert," George said, turning to his brother imploringly. "Get these two girls into the car and let's be off."

"Yes, let's move, love," Herbert said. "Into Uncle George's nice car, Francey."

"You know I've got the fish on," Helen said.

Through sobs, Frances turned a big red face to George.

"I gotta go to school this afternoon," she said. "Miss Angello would never forgive me if I missed my dancing."

George squatted on his haunches and spread his hands in appeal.

"Look, sweetie, I want you to come with us. We're going to do something so special, ever so special, better even than going to the zoo. This may be the most important day in your little life. Now you don't think your old uncle would tell you wrong, do you?"

"No . . . But . . . but it's forward kicking this afternoon." And she dissolved into tears again.

"It's no good, George," Helen said. "We just can't come, and that's all about it."

"You are a lot!" George said.

"Well it's no good being nasty, George. I mean how *can* we come?"

"May I have a drink of water?" George asked. He looked at his watch. It was 12.50. As Helen was filling the glass, baby Susan began to weep. Herbert hustled out into the back garden to rock the pram.

When he returned, George said briskly, "One last appeal to your sense of proportion. The bloke that phoned this gen to the *Mail*, Ken Gillwood—you've met him, Herbert—he was in the 'Gloucester Head' last month—he's reliable. Before phoning through, he drove out on his motor bike to check details. He says this thing can only be a spaceship. It looks like a zeppelin sitting on end, and must be all of eighty feet high. It's churned up the earth a bit and set light to a

rick nearby. When Ken saw it at quarter to twelve there was no activity round it—no alien activity, that is, though the Newbury fire brigade had arrived to cope with the rick.

"Now, Herb, you used to belong to a UFO club, and Helen and you thought you saw a flying saucer over Reading station once—"

"It was Basingstoke, and it was when I was expecting Frances," Helen said, as though that disposed of that.

"Okay, okay, we've all been young and foolish, but what I'm trying to say is that—no flattery—you're an intelligent couple, with open minds. You've always known that visitors from another planet *could* come. Now they *have* come. *I* don't doubt it, and you know how I used to scoff. Well, what I'm offering you is a free peep before half the country gets there or the police cordon the place off."

"So, last time of asking, are you coming?"

Helen and Herbert looked at each other.

"It's the children . . ." Helen said.

"No, it's not that," Herbert said, "but look, George, have you considered it might be dangerous? You know as well as I do that if this thing has come from another planet, its crew will be armed with all sorts of super-weapons."

George held up a hand.

"Enough, Herb. This is no time to be ignoble. You stay and mow the lawn in safety. I'm off."

"—but there may be misunderstandings. The aliens may not want trouble any more than we do—"

"Okay, Herb, laddie. You're the family man. Get the front door sandbagged. I'm off."

Sighing, he walked down the passage into the hall. As he went, he could hear Helen saying, "Why don't you go, dear? There's nothing to stop you going."

Ignoring them, George went out and climbed into his car. It was ten minutes past one. He had started up when Herbert came running to him.

"Perhaps I'll come," he said. "Helen'll stay and look after the kids."

"Jump in," George said briefly. He slid forward to the edge of the lawn, backed round to the garage and had the car facing towards the gate when Helen came running onto the porch.

"George . . . George, look, if Herb's coming, I'd better come to. Do you mind?"

"Jump in," George said.

"Well hang on while I get things organised, for goodness sake. I won't be a minute."

She was not a minute. She was twenty-three minutes. The kitchen had to be seen to, the baby's bottle had to be prepared and put into a vacuum flask, a note had to be left for the baker. Frances had to be taken to a neighbour for her lunch and was left with strict instructions about crossing the road at the zebra crossing on her way to school. The front door key was hidden under the front door mat for Eric when he returned, and a note was left for him (pinned next to the baker's) explaining where everyone had gone and where the key was hidden. The washing was taken in off the line in case it rained.

Then Helen just slipped upstairs, changed her dress and put something on her face. She did well to manage it all in twenty-three minutes.

Coughing angrily as he flicked away the butt of his fourth successive cigarette, George helped her push the carry-cot into the back of the car. And then they were away. It was almost a quarter to two when they got onto the A4.

Checking with the address he had been given, George turned off onto a side road before they reached Newbury race course. The traffic here was thick and slow-moving.

"Do you think all these people have come to see . . ." Herbert said, letting his voice fade away.

"Why not? They've had time enough to get here," George said flippantly. The wait had made him cold, sardonic. Herbert, on the other hand, had become infected with excitement; or perhaps the sight of this line of cars had persuaded him that he was doing more than pursue a private delusion of his brother's.

"To think they actually landed in England!" he exclaimed. "It's the greatest event since the birth of Christ . . . Here, George, do you reckon there are any Russian spies about yet?"

"One in the car behind," George said, referring to an Austin Countryman which was hooting imperiously.

They rounded a bend in the lane, and there—a field away, beyond a heavy summer hedge—the upper half of the alien ship was visible, its nose pointing like a blunt spire up to the cloudy English skies.

"That reminds me," Helen said, horror-struck, "I've asked the Vicar and Mrs. Chadlington to tea this afternoon. In all the flap I quite forgot! You'll have to turn back, George."

George laughed wildly.

Herbert nudged him before he could say anything silly. "I just saw the vicar's car ahead," he said. "He must have forgotten too."

The two men concentrated on the ship. It generated in their breasts the true thrill, the true wonder. That hull had nosed its way through unknown millions of miles of vacuum, to face Earth with a challenge—a hope—a threat—greater than any it had faced before. Standing silent in the rural landscape, it seemed to radiate a sense of its alien origins.

"What the hell's this?" George said.

The cars ahead were turning off the little side road into a dusty private road, to the gate of which George had now come. The gate was open, but a burly young man in a collarless shirt blocked the way. He held a cake tin bearing on the outside a crude picture of Windsor Castle and inside a pile of silver. Round his neck was a roughly written placard saying ENTRANCE FEE : ADULTS 1/- EACH, CARS 1/6, CHILDREN 6d.

"What the hell's this?" George repeated, sticking his head out of the window to say it to the burly young man.

"Entrance fee, shilling each, cars one and six, sir," said the youth cheerfully.

"I can read, thank you. I'm questioning your right to rook me for going to look at that ship, which is certainly not your property."

The youth grinned widely.

"I aren't charging you for looking at the ship, sir, I'm charging you for coming on my father's land. You can look from the road for nothing if you likes."

"It's nothing but a damned swindle," George said. "You wait till the police come."

"Oh, we lets them in for nothing, sir."

"For heaven's sake, George, don't argue. Let's pay up and get in," Herbert said.

With a bad grace, his temper not improved by more hooting from behind, George fished in his pocket and produced four and sixpence.

"Thank you, sir," said the burly youth respectfully, "and the babe in the back is another sixpence. We counts it as a child."

"It is a child, you fool!"

"Then that'll be another sixpence, sir, if you please."

Beyond speech, George paid up. They bumped down the dusty track and so into the field that contained the alien ship. Some thirty cars had already arrived and it was obvious there would soon be an overcrowding problem; the field was not large, and the half of it round the ship had been cordoned off by local police.

The fire engine sat in the far corner of the field beside a still-smouldering remnant of rick. Its crew were sipping cups of tea brought from the farmhouse, or sucking ices—George saw that an enterprising vendor was already on the scene, doing a brisk trade in iced lollies.

Leaving Susan to sleep peacefully in the back of the car, George, Herbert and Helen made their way over to the rope, standing as near as they could to the ship. They fell silent as they gazed at it.

"It's not really as big as I'd imagined it," Herbert said disappointedly. "Still, it's a beauty."

"Yes, it's a beauty," George breathed. They all took it in in awe.

"It makes me want to recite poetry," Helen said. "I can't find any words of my own. 'Now God be thanked who matched us to His hour,' you know . . ."

Unboundedly grateful that at last they had reached a common and elevated mood, George said "Funnily enough, I was thinking of a bit of Rupert Brooke too. What is it? Something about ' . . and gentleness, In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.' But perhaps that's not very appropriate."

They stared in silence again. Under this English heaven, the alien ship had acquired what appeared to be its first marking of the voyage: a white slash of bird dropping up by the nose. Otherwise its only other prominent feature was a round metal protrusion half way up its length, which they took to be a hatch. There were no ports visible. There was no sign of life.

George started looking about for other newspaper men. Cudliffe, who was officially covering for the *Mail*, had presum-

ably come and gone with his photographer. As yet there seemed to be nobody about from the London dailies.

"Is your pal Gillwood still here?" Helen asked, divining George's thoughts.

"No. He's probably covering a Women's Institute meeting by now. God, the irony of it all! Something world-shattering like this and not a flaming soul who matters is about: just a gaggle of local cops and a few sightseers who couldn't care less. The thing landed at least three hours ago! If this was America, I bet the President would have been on the spot by now."

"To say nothing of the heavy tanks," added Herbert.

"Well, it's no use you men just criticizing," Helen said. "All you ever do is talk. If this is your big moment, why not take it? Do something."

"Such as?"

"You know as well as I do what they always do in the stories. Make some sort of signal or drawing to show them we're civilized."

"We could try it," Herbert said doubtfully. "You mean, make a diagram of the solar system or demonstrate the square root of minus one?"

George snorted.

"You might just as well try to explain to them why some people call napkins 'serviettes.' The principle behind that is as fundamental to human nature as maths is, and who's to know what's fundamental to their nature—fundamental enough to be expressed in pictures anyhow. Beside, how do we know the aliens see along the same bit of the radiation spectrum as we do? The lack of ports would suggest they don't. But if they *do*, then it's no good doing a damn thing till they open a window to watch it."

"Very logical, Mister Master Mind," Helen said, smiling. "Then how do you suggest we contact our visitors? And make it snappy because I think I can hear Susan crying."

George leant on the rope barrier with both hands and said ponderously, "There's no problem, Helen. You see, you and young Herb don't come to this with fresh minds. Mentally, fictionally, you've faced this wonderful arrival for years. Your UFO and s-f magazines often tackle this very problem: How to contact the aliens. I say it's no problem."

"Then why aren't we shaking hands with them right now?" Herbert asked.

"Don't make cheap jokes, Herb; they cost you too much. Look at it this way. This glorious ship is evidence of a great technological civilization. This implies also a civilization with as much goodwill as ours—any less and it would have blown itself to bits long before it got to making this ship. So then; intelligence plus civility equals reason. The boys in there are reasonable. More reasonable than we are."

"I'd have granted you that without being argued into it."

"I must go and see Susan and give her her bottle," Helen said. "I'm sure she's crying."

She left as George continued his argument.

"If the aliens are reasonable and if they can detect us at all, then they will be able to detect that we are reasonable."

"Why?"

"Use your loaf! Would a crowd of animals or savages behave like this English crowd? Would it put up barriers to keep itself away from what it has come to see? Would it pay tokens at the gate? Would it let itself be kept in order by only half a dozen bobbies if it were motivated by blood lust? You know jolly well it wouldn't! And another thing—look at the pattern of the English countryside, which we presume the aliens saw on their way down. Isn't its neatness and organisation a perfect example of the triumph of reason over nature?"

Herbert groaned, scratched his head, and ended up resting his hands on the rope in unconscious parody of his brother's pose.

"All this is obvious enough to you—and to me, of course. But why should it be obvious to really alien aliens?"

"Because they must be *reasonable* to be here at all, whether they look like elephants, octopuses or bloody sunflowers. And however stupid and bourgeois and conventional you may find the assembly here in this field, it too is governed by reason—so conspicuously so that it is probably more evident to the boys in the ship than it is to us. Ergo, we don't have to do a thing. We just wait until they've recovered from their journey and feel like communicating."

"I wonder if you'd mind not leaning on the rope, sir? I'm afraid with the ground being so hard the supports aren't in very firm."

The speaker was a policeman. He smiled at the brothers apologetically and they immediately straightened up.

"Sorry, constable," George said. "We're just so interested in this spaceship. Have you got any details about it you can tell us?"

"Can't really say as I have, sir," the policeman said, obviously only too ready to stay and chat. "Of course it's a nuisance, it being here, but just think if it had come down while the races were on. We have enough trouble with the traffic on the main road as it is."

Herbert nodded gravely and said in a solemn voice, "Is anyone being charged with obstruction?"

"Obstruction? Well, no, sir. We don't know who the thing belongs to, like, yet."

"The Martians, would you say?"

The constable laughed delightedly, displaying enormous white teeth.

"You didn't really think it was a spaceship, did you, sir? Like on one of them television plays? It's a good job nobody believes them or we'd all be hiding in air raid shelters by now."

"Where do you think it came from then?" George demanded sharply.

The constable dropped his voice. "We reckon we got a pretty good idea where it come from, although no one's letting on yet. Now do you see that gent down by the hedge at the far end of the field, my side of the barrier? Sitting on a folding stool?"

They marked him well. He was young, spruce, self-contained, probably a university man.

"He came in a big Alvis saloon," the policeman continued impressively. "And there was two other men in with him. They're in the farmhouse now, goodness knows what doing. Well, they're from Harwell."

"Likely enough," George said. "It's no distance from here."

"More than likely: certain. They're from Harwell. It gives the whole game away, doesn't it?"

"How do you mean?"

The constable shook his head in pity for all persons unable to make deductions.

"Why, sir, this here machine belongs to them. They're up to all sorts of secret things at Harwell. I'll be surprised if it doesn't turn out to be worked by nuclear physics."

And having thus blinded the two brothers by science, he passed heavily on. As George and Herbert looked at each other and smiled sorrowingly, Helen returned carrying a newly-fed Susan.

"I just heard a man in the crowd saying that your spaceship was made at Harwell, George," she told him. "Suppose it *is* an experimental plane or weapon . . ."

"Come on, Helen, you know better than that. You're talking like that copper. It's a mark of ignorance to be unable to believe the unlikely."

"Well, I'd like to see inside first before I become too sure," she said.

They stood about aimlessly, waiting for something to happen. From the spaceship itself there was no sign ; the next diversion came from the other direction. The jib of a crane slid slowly between trees as it moved down the farm road. A great deal of shouting ensued. A small bulldozer appeared and demolished a stretch of bank, thus clearing a way for a procession of vehicles into the field.

First came an AERE Harwell Mutt with its blue and grey panels, followed by a civil ambulance. The crane was next, a twenty ton lorry-mounted affair that lurched into the field in a business-like way. Another large vehicle followed, an RAF super-articulated 'Queen Mary.' Close behind it were two lorries loaded with kit—winches, cables and canvas slings were visible in one—while the rear of this procession was brought up by an Army wireless truck.

"My God!" Herbert exclaimed, pointing to the two lorries. "A Bomb Disposal unit! They're never going to load the ship onto that 'Queen Mary,' are they?"

It soon became obvious that they were.

"I just want to see what happens when they try to remove the charge," commented George with grim relish.

The crane shaped up to the ship like a stork about to fight a torpid seal. Meanwhile, a ladder was stood against the hull, and an officer in dungarees shinned up it to tap smartly on the circular hatch—if hatch it was. As the echoes died across the field, an uneasy silence fell over the onlookers. The majority obviously feared massive retaliation, Helen with them.

"We've got the children to think of," she said to her husband. "The aliens aren't going to like this a bit. Let's get out."

"Put Susie back in the car," Herbert said, watching horrified as the officer, receiving no answer to his knock, produced oxy-acetelene equipment and proceeded to try and drill a hole in the hatch. George went pale around the gills. The crowd began to back away. Only the Harwell men stood their ground.

The little white flame had no effect on the metal. Eventually the officer, having achieved nothing, climbed down the ladder again; he was sweating as he retired to the lorry and dumped his kit.

Now the rest of the team got to work. They had been well drilled. The ship was hitched about with wire rope and secured. The hook of the crane was lowered and packed into position under the rope. At a signal, the cable tightened and the crane took most of the ship's weight. Block and tackle from one of the disposal lorries now took over control, swinging the ship's nose round and down until the crane was able to slide forward with the ship in position over the waiting 'Queen Mary.' As it was lowered down, the cable paid out too fast, so that the ship settled on the articulated vehicle with a noise like a herd of lust-maddened antelopes cantering over the Forth Bridge.

"Holy stars!" exclaimed Herbert. "If the aliens don't interpret that as an act of aggression, they must be mad."

Susan woke and started to cry.

"Perhaps they're all dead inside there," George suggested. As he was speaking and Helen was trying to soothe the baby, their friend the policeman came up.

"There you are, sir," he said. "This rather confirms what I told you. I expect they'll take it back to Harwell now."

"My God, Herb, perhaps they are going to take it to Harwell . . ."

"Don't be daft, they'll probably take it to some Army depot and nobody will ever see who or what comes out of it," Herbert said.

By this time, the space ship was being secured to the 'Queen Mary.'

George grabbed Helen and Herb by the arm.

"Listen, the powers that be may have a bright idea here, if they're going to cart the ship away to—well, say to Harwell. Anything they may want will then be on the spot. It'll be more convenient for the aliens too, and no doubt they are sus-

pending judgment until they see where they're being taken."

" You still think they're reasonable ?" Herb said. " And why are you pulling us along like this ?"

" I'm getting you to the car. We're going to get out of here first before the rush starts."

" Splendid !" Helen exclaimed. " At last you're coming down to Earth. It's high time we were getting back."

George cocked an eyebrow at her as he fished the car key out of his pocket. He nodded towards the ' Queen Mary,' which was already moving slowly across the field with its alien load.

" Honey, I'll get you home as soon as possible. But before that we're going to follow that ship and see where it's taken. I may seem to trust the aliens ; maybe that's only because I don't know 'em. But I do know our authorities, and I wouldn't trust 'em further than I could throw 'em. Remember Belloc : ' We knew no harm of Bonaparte but plenty of the squire ' ? If that damned ship disappears, it may disappear for good in a cloud of security."

" Spoken like a newspaper man !" Herbert said. " Pile in, Helen, and let's go !"

They piled in, slamming the doors as they started to bump across the field after the big articulated vehicle. Certainly, as George had planned, they were the first on the move, except for the crane, which bounded recklessly across the field. The ' Queen Mary ' had by now negotiated the awkward opening and was heading down the farm road.

" What's that crazy devil doing ?" George growled, as the crane driver slewed up to the opening. Next minute the other vehicle was stuck across the gap.

" Silly ass !" Herbert cried.

The crane driver backed, merely getting himself further stuck.

" Bloody amateur !" George bawled out of the window. " Left hand down, man. Waija think you're doing ?"

But the crane was in trouble. Other civilian cars edged up to George as it manoeuvred. The Alvis came, honking impatiently. George joined in the chorus.

" He did it on purpose, George," Helen said quietly. " You're not meant to follow that ship."

George turned his red face to her.

"Girl, you're right. We're framed, and neatly too, I must say. Hang on here, will you? I'm going to phone Ken Gillwood from the farmhouse and get him to follow the ship up on his motor bike. He should be at home by now."

Flinging open the car door, George hurried between the other waiting cars and sprinted over the field. Climbing a bank, he pushed through the hedge at its thinnest point and jumped down into the lane.

The farmer's wife opened the door to his knock.

"I'm sorry, sir, the telephone's out of order today," she said firmly. "Such a shame, just when we need it."

Before she shut the door in his face, George saw behind her one of the Harwell men, self-possessed and unsmiling.

Two days later, George phoned his brother from the *Mail* office again.

"Herbert? That you? George here. Get Helen and the kids rounded up and I'll collect you in ten minutes."

"My God, George, not again!"

"Listen, Herb, this is really big! Ken Gillwood's just been on the blower. Guess what? You know I said we'd never hear of those aliens again? Well, I was wrong . . ."

"Wouldn't be the first time. What's happened?"

"Something's just blown Harwell off the face of the Earth. Tell Helen to get the baby's bottle ready."

—Brian W. Aldiss



*it is an accepted theory that the ancient Chinese and the early Egyptians—and probably most past-dawn civilisations—discovered many secrets of nature which have since been lost. Much of our presentday knowledge could just as easily disappear—and if discovered in the future could well be classed as "magic."*

# MUMBO-JUMBO MAN

by Philip E. High

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"Road block ! Where ?" Penrose's pale eyes stared at the man almost with suspicion.

"About six miles ahead, sir. We saw one of them run across the roadway about two hundred yards the other side of Twin Peaks."

Penrose stroked his square-cut greying moustache with the tip of his finger, a habit of his when deep in thought. If the enemy were on the far side of Twin Peaks, it was obviously something more than a block, it was an ambush. Twin Peaks marked the entrance to String Valley and if the enemy were there in any strength at all . . .

Penrose, who knew this part of the country intimately from five years of almost continuous fighting, digested the news with an inward sense of desolation. Until now, the valley had provided a handy escape route to their own fixed lines ; now it had become a trap. This was the end. Everyone came to it sometime and this was *his* time. They'd suffered a nasty mauling on Yellow River, a one sided melee which had reduced his strength to a mere three hundred and sixty men. Soon, these, too, would be written off as 'lost in action.'

Automatically he held up his hand for the column to halt. "Send Lieutenant Bruce forward immediately, please." He turned. "Sergeant, better tell the men to dig in."

"Sir?" Bruce saluted with almost parade ground snap.

Penrose shook his head slightly. "I've bad news, I'm afraid. We're cut off."

"Cut off, sir!" Bruce was an earnest young man with grey, slightly protruding eyes and an irritating habit of questioning the obvious. "I don't see how they could have jumped ahead of us as quickly as that."

"Neither do I but they're there." He suppressed a sigh, the Seth could use terrain of this kind, slip between the tightly packed trees like lizards.

He said, heavily: "I've told the men to dig in, the main body of the enemy must be coming up behind us quickly, which, to put it bluntly, means encirclement." He paused, eyeing the other's dust-caked face with detached alertness. "You appreciate, I hope, that we keep fighting until destroyed. We can't fight our way through an impossible place like String Valley and the enemy don't take prisoners."

"Yes, sir—yes, I see." Bruce's face remained nearly expressionless. "I suppose we'd better pick our positions, make the enemy pay a pretty heavy price, sir."

Penrose warmed to him briefly. If Bruce had been going to live—never mind. Despite one or two irritating mannerisms, the boy had courage, with a little more experience, promotion would have been certain.

He turned abruptly: "I think we'll put the Luendor among those rocks, gives the weapon cover and fair field of fire."

Ten minutes later, Bruce, with a sergeant, was directing the construction of perimeter defences. Already the air was vibrant with the growl of portable excavators and columns of soil geysered upwards as the men constructed foxholes and concealed fire points.

Bruce sighed inwardly as he watched. Portable excavators, lighter than the ancient entrenching tool, pill grenades, energy weapons, all the paraphernalia and know-how of a space-borne army and, here they were, back to the days of 'the-poor-bloody-infantry.' He'd seen a picture like this once, what had the historian called it—a film? It had showed men digging foxholes, burrowing into the earth just like this. A picture of a war fought centuries ago in the days when man

had been engaged in bitter combat with his own kind. Now, apart from the fact they fought a different enemy, they were right back where they started.

Bruce lit a cigarette frowning. He understood the reasons, of course, but knowing the reasons wasn't going to pull them out of this spot. Knowing that you couldn't hold a perimeter hundreds of light years in circumference against an alien invader however huge your fleets, was no comfort down here. You couldn't hold a habitable planet with a space ship either, there were too many planets and not enough ships. You did the next best thing, you dropped a garrison of combat troops to hold the planet against enemy occupation. Unfortunately, as in a large number of cases, the enemy had thought of that too and back you were to fighting the hard way.

As for the rest—well, on a front of such dimensions, there was bound to be a sector starved of suitable transport and air cover, and this particular planet happened to be the unfortunate Cinderella. They had had some M.6 rotors and a fair backing of armoured vehicles. The M.6. rotors had long since been clawed from the sky by concentrated ground fire. The armoured vehicles stood idle at base, useless in a terrain of ravines, spiked boulders and trees so densely packed they appeared like a solid wooden fence miles in thickness.

Fortunately, as regards equipment, the enemy were in no better plight but otherwise they had all the advantages.

The Terran armies were confined to trails and natural pathways, the Seth, with their slender agile bodies, used the terrain as if it were their birth place.

As in a lot of wars, it was not guts, technical superiority or even numbers which spelled victory, it was mobility and the enemy had all of it. They were chopping the Terran forces to bloody pieces by sheer speed of movement.

In space, Earth definitely had an edge and was gaining slow ascendancy, but down here—Bruce scowled. It was just his damn bad luck to be down here.

He looked about him, at the dusty clearing surrounded by tightly packed trees. The trees had shiny black trunks and sprouted at the top into feathery blue leaves like impossible palms.

Their path had led through the centre of the clearing, a stream whispered on the far side and, beyond that, the trees grew solidly again. From side to side the clearing was a bare

five hundred yards across and almost hopeless for defence, but what else could they do ?

Dust-caked, exhausted troops, now almost completely entrenched, appeared briefly above foxholes and a fine white dust drifted upwards from almost every movement. They looked hard to move but Bruce had no illusions, the battle would be brief, spectacular but wholly final. The Seth would use their famous pusher-guns, spewing dust upwards and caving in the foxholes. A shower of spinner bombs would effectively eliminate those who survived the artificial earthquake.

Bruce shrugged. Everyone came to it sometime, but did it have to be now ? Trouble was there was nothing they could do about it, nothing at all. Good God—the Mumbo !

Penrose was staring bitterly from his command hole when Bruce joined him.

"This a damn bad show, Bruce. Hate dying like a rat in a trap. If I thought we stood the slightest chance I'd try and fight my way out—but through String Valley, no ! Here, we might take a few of them with us but we'd never even see the slippery little swine if we tried to force the valley."

Bruce cleared his throat hesitantly and was careful to pick his words. "I was just wondering, sir—in view of the situation—whether we couldn't—" he used the Major's own word deliberately, "give the 'Mumbo' a chance. I mean, sir, since the outcome is a foregone conclusion, shouldn't we be sporting? Sort of rotten way to die, isn't it ? He isn't armed, sir, and he's never had a chance to do his stuff."

Two tiny furrows appeared between the major's greying brows. "What *can* the idiot do ? No, no, Bruce, I think not."

"It was only a suggestion, sir, like yourself, I don't *believe* in it. I meant it only as a gesture, the chap's born it pretty well, marched with the best, helped the medical people a lot, I hear. It seems a bit hard, sir, that he never had a chance to try."

The major stroked his moustache, frowning. "I see your point, of course, and, I agree. It does seem rather unfair. Very well, it can do no harm now."

"There's no mistake ?" Kenton looked up from his fox-hole in disbelief. "You do really mean me ?"

"Of course I mean you. For God's sake get over there before he changes his mind."

Kenton shrugged slightly, climbed out of the foxhole and began to walk across the clearing. He assumed they were in a spot. His people were never called in until the army got into something it couldn't get out of by itself. No wonder they called the Corps 'the last ditchers' back at base. Here, of course, the major referred to him as 'the Mumbo-jumbo fellow' which was, perhaps, a far less insulting term than some used by other officers.

"Sir?" He saluted clumsily.

"Ah, yes, Kenton." Penrose addressed a spot slightly beyond the other's left shoulder, thereby avoiding his eyes. "It would appear that you may be called upon to—exercise your—methods immediately. Lieutenant Bruce will explain the position."

Penrose turned away with a sense of relief. He was not an unkind man, he felt no personal dislike of Kenton, but he was bitterly disappointed. The last supply ship had brought, not an M.10 flyer or even one of the new scythe guns, but a mumbo-jumbo man, specifically directed to his command. The fellow had been kicked out of other commands, no doubt, sent to this forgotten front to get rid of him.

Sometimes Penrose wondered privately if there was someone at High Command secretly working for the enemy. Spending time, money, manpower, on an insane scheme like this. What the hell were they thinking of?

Kenton noticed the major's attitude without surprise or even particular resentment. Two years in the capacity of buffoon-in-chief had, if not hardened him, created psychological defence mechanisms which allowed contempt and mockery to leave him unruffled.

All members of the Corps were Special Honorary Lieutenants which meant, in cold hard fact, he was an officer without authority.

He turned his attention to Bruce who was patiently explaining the situation.

When he had finished, Kenton asked. "How far is their main body behind us?"

"Well—" Bruce pulled his ear thoughtfully. "We mined our retreat pretty carefully but the Seth are methodical creatures and like to avoid needless casualties. Giving their engineers time to clear the road, say four hours march."

"Know where the mines are?"

"Everything went into my re-caller unit." He withdrew the tiny instrument from his pocket. "We can avoid them."

"Good, let's get moving."

"Moving?" Bruce stared at him blankly.

"We're going back along the trail, retracing our steps about a mile."

"Oh, I don't know—" began Bruce, doubtfully.

Kenton straightened. "When authority is transferred to a member of the Corps, Lieutenant, orders will be obeyed."

It was Bruce's turn to straighten. There was an authority in the other's voice which almost, but not quite, caused him to salute. Good God, yes, when he'd made the suggestion about calling in Kenton, he'd completely forgotten the ruling. Standing orders were, that if you called in the Corps, *they* were in command.

He glanced uneasily over his shoulder. Major Penrose was inspecting a fire point and had his back turned.

"Mind if we sort of slide out now?" Bruce was shame-faced and embarrassed. "Don't want to attract too much attention."

"As you wish." Kenton had untidy fair hair and a long mobile mouth which was inclined to humour. Bruce glanced at it suspiciously but it was straight and unsmiling.

They walked in silence for what seemed an endless time, then Kenton stopped.

"This will do." He unbuckled the portable excavator, turned the switch from "D" to "S" and extracted the bayonet-saw from the handle.

Dazedly Bruce saw him insert the blade, lift the instrument and skilfully fell a small tree. Deftly he cut the trunk into logs and the logs into slender laths until he had a sizeable heap.

"I wouldn't stand there, wrong position altogether, move back about ten feet." Kenton bent down and began to arrange the laths into a curious pattern, skilfully fixing them together with tiny grey pills of adhesive plastic.

Bruce resisted an impulse to scratch his head stupidly. "May I ask what you're doing?"

Kenton, concentrating, was irritated, finding the question singularly inane. "I'm casting a spell," he said, nastily. "That's what mumbo-jumbo men are for, isn't it?" The

resentment and frustration of months had suddenly boiled over.

Bruce flushed beneath his caking of dust, he was uncomfortably aware that the rebuke was justified. He had blindly followed the Major's lead and, if not treating Kenton with open contempt, had pointedly ignored his existence. Possibly it was lack of thought, or blind acceptance of general opinion. The officers and men regarded the Corps as a huge joke or sheer stupidity and had made Kenton the butt of their opinions.

Bruce shuffled his feet uncomfortably. "I'm sorry. I suppose, in a way, I asked for that."

"No, I don't think you did, it's psychological really. Ever tried being a clown?" He smiled. "Let's call it quits." He bent to his task again.

Bruce thought he recognised a pentagon take shape as the other worked, then it was lost in a rather eye-twisting collection of lopsided triangles and distorted squares which Kenton had constructed from the laths. The whole thing looked like a picture he had once seen in a history book. A set-piece for a firework display.

Kenton set it up carefully and stood back. "Fifty yards from the bend in the trail, just right." He smiled. "That's all, we can go back now."

They walked in silence for about a hundred yards then Bruce's curiosity could be restrained no longer.

"What the devil was that thing?"

Kenton smiled faintly. "Without malice, call it a spell."

"You actually think it might *do* something?"

"My training leads me to suppose that it might," said Kenton guardedly. He could understand the other's scepticism, anyone's scepticism, but they could give the Corps a chance before they condemned it outright.

The name, of course, was unfortunate and had probably been inspired and insisted upon by a similar sceptic at the War Office. As a title for a front line combat unit 'The Special Corps of Magicians' was unlikely to inspire confidence anywhere. Bluntly it must raise the ire of every commanding officer rigidly trained in the employment of existing weapons. 'Someone high up,' thought Kenton, sourly, 'stabbed us in the back before we began.'

He said, evenly. "Major Penrose appreciates, I hope, that, in calling me in, he has transferred command to the Corps?"

Bruce coughed uncomfortably. "It's just possible that it may have slipped his mind."

Kenton nodded apparently untroubled. "The Corps meets a lot of officers with bad memories but we usually make out."

Bruce looked at him quickly and uneasily, he sounded damn confident. In a way Kenton worried him, he looked so *ordinary*. A chap who belonged to a unit called 'The Corps of Magicians' should look wild eyed and occasionally mutter to himself. Kenton, however, looked like any other soldier and was even lighting a cigarette.

"How did you get into the Corps?" enquired Bruce with, he hoped, casual politeness.

Kenton shrugged. "I was roped in, snatched out of cybernetics and sent to the Corps training school."

"Cybernetics! Then you are—were—actually a scientist."

"I'm still a scientist in a rather unusual branch with, unfortunately, a background which is invariably suspect."

"But Magic—" Bruce did not finish the sentence.

Kenton nodded. "I understand your sceptism but are you aware that a large number of drugs found in our modern pharmacopoeia are actually based on the magical cures of witch doctors and ancient sorcerers?" He smiled faintly. "Suppose, for reasons unknown, one of the sciences was lost but its memory, interwoven with the immediate religions and superstitions of the age, was passed on by word of mouth. An aspect of that science might, in a future age, read something like this." Kenton cleared his throat. "Take the scrapings of a goodly sword and add thereto the yellow powder which burns with an acrid smell. Mix well together with a leavening of charred wood and there shall come flame and thunder." He grinned. "Does that sound suitably mediaeval and impressive? The lost science could be chemistry and, if you're interested, the magical formula is gunpowder."

"Good God!" Bruce was startled. "The Corps has actually delved into some of these ancient beliefs and produced something practical."

"Certain startling results have been noted," said Kenton evasively.

"Would these results effect an alien enemy?"

Kenton nodded thoughtfully. "Yes. The enemy's conceptions of the universe are based on similar senses to our own—sight, sound, touch and, to a lesser degree, smell."

Bruce realised suddenly that they had reached the clearing and the major was striding towards them.

"Kindly explain your absence." Penrose's voice was cold and faintly accusing.

Before Bruce could answer, Kenton stepped forward and there was something in his hand, something which looked like a silver bubble. He tossed it casually into the air, caught it, tossed it up again. It went up—down—up—down, shimmering like a rainbow.

"A reconnaissance as you suggested, sir." Kenton's voice was respectful but quite normal as if he knew the major would remember and curiously the major did.

"Oh, ah, yes, of course. Can't think what's happening to my memory lately. No sign of an advance party?"

"None, sir."

'Hypnotism,' thought Bruce, dully. 'A new kind, probably a new technique because Kenton was speaking as if respectfully reminding his superior officer.'

Kenton went on reminding, inserting opinions into the other's mind, suggesting a plan of attack as if the idea had come from the major himself.

Bruce felt sweat prickle his skin and begin to run down his face. It was not the fact that he thought the major hypnotised which was worrying him, it was the strategy which Kenton was suggesting. The Lieutenant might have been a first class cyberneticist and have a magnificent grasp of Corps experiments but as a soldier? Bruce shuddered slightly. An attack on the lines Kenton was suggesting was as insane as marching an army over the edge of a precipice.

Kenton finished and the major turned abruptly and strode to the centre of the clearing.

Bruce was irritated by the fact that Penrose looked anything but hypnotised. On the contrary, he looked grim, alert and held himself like a man who had reached a decision and intended to carry it through.

"Attention!" Penrose had the kind of voice which carried without shouting.

He waited until the normal shifting and shuffling had died down. "Well, men, we have been together a long time and it has always been my policy to be frank. As some of you may have guessed, our scaly friends have jumped ahead of us and hold String Valley. A numerically superior force is marching to overtake us which, as you all realise, means encirclement. I had half decided to make a last stand in this clearing but to sit and await destruction is abhorrent to us all, no matter how many of the enemy we take with us. I have therefore decided to attempt a break-through." He paused, and such was the force of his personality that he appeared to look at each man individually.

"This is a hazardous undertaking and the odds are weighed heavily against us, but I know I can rely on each and every one of you to do his best. At least we can show these blasted lizards we can do something more than fight from holes in the ground."

There was a ragged cheer and the apathy which Bruce had sensed gathering about the troops seemed slowly to disperse.

The major held up his hand. "Before we attempt the march, Lieutenant Kenton would like to say a few words."

Kenton stepped forward. Beneath the dust he was smiling lazily. "I'm the magician everyone thinks crazy. However, it just so happens that I agree with you. Any questions?"

The men looked at one another uneasily, then someone caught on and began to laugh. The laughter spread and they began to look at Kenton with something approaching liking if not respect.

Kenton nodded. "All right, now that that question is settled, let's be practical, even crazy men have ideas sometimes. An advance party is going forward ahead of the main body but we don't want to attract attention to it, we want the enemy to occupy himself with something else. Years ago, when wars were more primitive, there were bands, bugles, drums to boost morale and perhaps suggest a larger force than was possessed. We still need to suggest a larger force but we lack the instruments, so we shall have to shout. Maybe, if we shout loud enough at the right time, it will take the enemy's mind off other things, like, for example, someone trying to outflank him."

Kenton paused, his face suddenly intent. "When the time comes, I want a rather special shout, a shout like this—" He threw back his head.

Despite the heat and dust, Bruce shivered. Kenton had made a sound like nothing he had ever heard, a sound which began deep in his chest, rose to a kind of despairing wail and trailed away into a silence.

Kenton grinned disarmingly. "Horrible, isn't it? But like the alpine yodel it carries a long way and that's what we want. I know none of you think you can do it but when the time comes you'll find it surprisingly simple."

Bruce swore as he marched, quietly under his breath but with an intensity of feeling which surprised even himself. To think there had been a time when he had almost regarded Kenton as a rational being. It was all very well to suggest an outflanking movement and to hypnotise a superior officer into attempting it but when you had to lead the assault . . .

One hundred men, detached from the main body to try and outflank an enemy already in position and waiting for them. Good God, it was suicide! The Seth with their acute senses would hear them coming before they got within a mile of the valley.

Superficially, and perhaps on paper, the manoeuvre sounded reasonable enough. The idea being, that on nearing the valley, the advance party should divide and attempt the ascent of Twin Peaks which guarded the entrance. The Peaks themselves, although steep, provided reasonable footholds for any active man. It was also true that the trees grew less densely near the valley and would not unduly hinder their progress. Theoretically, the manoeuvre was feasible. Scale the peaks, descend to the cover of the trees, then creep up behind the valley ridge, taking the Seth from the rear while they concentrated on the main body marching into the valley below.

Bruce smiled twistedly. Theoretically sound! The kindergarten strategy of the 'bright little boy' showing off after his first month at a military school. A manoeuvre which blandly ignored the existence of an astute and terrifyingly competent enemy who had reduced ground warfare to a supreme art.

Obviously, the Seth would not leave Twin Peaks unguarded and, even if they had, his own men could no longer be regarded as 'active' in the truest sense. Battle and march-weary, some of them were inclined to stagger and they were already heavily burdened with equipment. The noise they would make scaling the peaks would sound like a squadron of armoured vehicles and the Seth would rub them all out of existence like so many insects.

Far away to the rear, a strange sound began, a sound which began as a shout and trailed away into a kind of despairing whimper. Kenton and his damn theories about deceiving the enemy with noise, what the hell did he think the Seth were—painted savages? Did the idiot imagine that a race which had nearly beaten them in space would be deceived by a row like that?

Bruce shrugged. He supposed it was all right as a signal, at least he knew that the main body was just leaving. He had ninety minutes to march the last six hundred yards, scale the peaks and get into position behind an enemy whose sense of hearing was about twice as acute as his own. ‘Easy’ he told himself, bitterly, ‘just shut your eyes and hope.’

He turned to the sergeant. “We’d better split up here. You take the left peak, and remember, no firing until the major’s force has entered the valley. When he shouts ‘take cover,’ you open up. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.” The man’s face was twisted and sardonic and the brief words heavy with irony. It was obvious that the man, a veteran, had even less faith in the scheme than Bruce himself. The dark contemptuous eyes mirrored his opinion clearly. Scale the Peaks! Hell, man, we’ll never reach the approaches. They’ll squash us into the ground with those bloody pusher-guns before our feet touch rock.

From far behind a curious sound rose, faded and rose again. Over two hundred voices doing Kenton’s—what could you call it—a belly shout?

Despite himself, Bruce shivered again. The sound reminded him of wolves baying in distant mountains, then he squared his shoulders and went grimly forward.

Twin Peaks rose blackly before them, the lower slopes rugged with boulder and razor-edged rock. No doubt, the pale yellow eyes of the enemy were watching them sardonically as they approached, biding their time for the burst of fire which would spatter their foes in bloody fragments all over the rocks.

He eased the heavy charge-pistol in its holster, keeping his hand on the butt. Dully, deep down inside him, was the knowledge that his life was near its end. Sweat trickled down

his face and his feet seemed weighted, dragging heavily through the dust.

Somewhat the situation took on the quality of a dream. He passed the first rocks and nothing happened. He could hear the breathing of the man behind him, the shuffle of boots in the dust. Above him, the upper slopes stretched in enormous blackness, shimmering and dancing in the heat.

Up, on, clutching the first hand-hold in the rock, clumsy booted foot fumbling for purchase. Climbing, climbing, the alien sun biting savagely into their backs. Fumbling for the next grip, numbed hands already bleeding and stripped of skin. They couldn't have got this far, could they? It was a trap, it must be a trap. The Seth were waiting until they were all exposed on the rock face then would pick them off like flies.

His hand reached over a ledge, seeking a grip, found it and pulled himself onto it, panting. Ledge? This wasn't a ledge—God! They'd made it. This was the summit! Better still, a buttress of jagged rock ran outwards, hiding them from the valley below. They couldn't have chosen a better place.

The descent was comparatively easy and they reached the cover of the sparse trees without incident.

After proceeding a hundred yards, he motioned the men to halt and went upwards alone towards the valley ridge.

He made the last six yards on his stomach, wriggling inch by inch, hauling himself over the rocky ridge by his hands. Cautiously he raised his head—and froze.

A bare ten feet below him, three Seth lay prone in a hollow behind a jagged spur of black rock. He had time to take in the whole scene before furtively wriggling back.

A curiously oblong, box-like weapon stood on a squat tripod and was trained on the valley below. A second alien peered downwards, slender bluish hands grasping a long white tube, the third was carefully arranging a line of the, now familiar, disc-like spinner grenades. Their attitudes, close to the ground, the blue-black metallic sheen of their minutely scaled skins reminded him more than ever before of lizards.

On return he detailed two soldiers to cover the aliens and waved the rest on.

After two hundred yards cautious progress, he made another reconnaissance and gasped silently.

Here the Seth were everywhere, in hollows, behind stunted trees, half buried in dust and even pressed flat to the baking rocks, their bodies glistening in the sun. A variety of curious weapons pointed downwards to the floor of the valley. This, then, was where the trap would be sprung.

He realised suddenly that the shouting of the main body was growing louder and that time was limited. He made his way back as quickly as possible and began to post his men where they could command most of the Seth strong points. Was it possible that the Seth had grown careless or contemptuous of their enemies? Had they never considered that a flanking movement by a determined advance force might be attempted?

He wriggled his way forward again, realising he must be in a position to direct the attack when it came. There had been no disturbances from the opposite side of the valley, so the other force, too, must have gained commanding positions above the enemy.

He lay still, watching, noting the details of his surroundings. String Valley was not a valley in the true sense but a narrow furrow in the Earth, a bare two hundred feet wide. The smoothness of the lower rocks suggested that the valley had once been the bed of a swiftly flowing river. The banks rose steeply on either side, covered in rock and stunted trees, an ideal position for the ambush the Seth had so carefully prepared.

Dimly he became conscious that the shouting had drawn closer, the major's force must be a bare five hundred yards from Twin Peaks. He was suddenly aware that the sound had taken on a curious rhythmic quality as if possessed by an underlying pulse. Further, he could *hear* the men's feet despite the dust, a steady thud which he could almost feel as if they were performing the ancient goose-step.

He shivered, filled with a curious mixture of elation and fear. It seemed to him that the sky darkened and a cold wind came whimpering between the rocks. He had an impression of something shapeless and immense sprawled blackly over the valley. Almost he cringed and then the impression was gone as the main body marched openly into the valley.

Bruce stared. The men marched as if they were on the parade ground, heads up, shoulders back, arms swinging, proudly. They looked like a victorious army, not the battle-weary, cynical troops he had left in the clearing.

Suddenly the shouting stopped, and the abrupt silence left a curious sense of explosive tension.

"Company—halt!" The major's voice reached him clearly.

"Take—cover!"

The ranks broke as if by magic, it might have been rehearsed in countless battle schools. The men literally dived for cover, some slithering on their bellies to chosen vantage points, weapons ready in their hands. . .

Below him, the Seth twitched, came suddenly to life as if startled from a heavy sleep. Behind a black rock, two of them swung their black, box-like weapon, pointing it downwards.

Bruce, laughing a little crazily, tossed a pill grenade between them and flung himself flat.

A column of white fire and sand leapt upwards, heat rushed over his head and the slap of the explosion numbed his ears.

He sprang to his feet, he thought he shouted an order but afterwards could not remember. For a second he stood on the ridge, unconsciously a perfect target, then he flung himself forward. The hollow where the Seth had lain still glowed with heat but of their bodies, nothing remained.

He was filled with a sudden unnatural elation, as if intoxicated with too many 'battle-tablets,' he somehow understood this kind of war. It was the first time in centuries that man had fought in close combat and the thought gave him a curious sense of power. By God, he'd show these aliens something now.

Dimly he was aware that his force had followed him and were plunging wildly down on a startled and disbelieving enemy. The whole valley was criss-crossed with the white streaks of human energy weapons, dust boiled upwards, slowly enveloping everything.

A Seth rose suddenly in front of him, so cleverly concealed that inevitably he would have stumbled on it, and raised a slender black rod.

Bruce hit it between the eyes with the butt of his heavy pistol, heard the crunch of impact, saw it topple backwards and roll over. He plunged on.

Somewhere to his right, a strange staccato thudding began. Instinctively he dropped flat, there was no mistaking an alien pusher-gun. Slightly ahead of him, a soldier screamed chokingly. Bruce saw him hurled against a rock and flatten

grotesquely as if punched by an enormous fist. God, he'd got to find that gun and knock it out before it punched his men into bloody fragments.

He ran forward, crouched, peering through the swirling dust, heading towards the sound. He was on the weapon and its crew before he realised it and, despite his elation, he panicked. The grenade had left his hand before he realised that he, himself, was within the 'effective area' of the weapon.

A sea of white light rushed at him from the ground and something fiery clutched at his body and hurled it into a spinning darkness.

He regained consciousness slowly, believing himself back on Earth engaged in his favourite hobby, yachting. There was the same motion, the same thud of tiny waves, and the sky seemed to swing from side to side. Funny coloured sky, wasn't it? He tried to move his arms and found them gummed to his chest with a curious transparent jelly. Dis-eptoplast! Good God, he'd been wounded. He was a stretcher case.

He looked about him dazedly and met the dark sardonic eyes of the sergeant from whom he had parted near Twin Peaks. The man was marching steadily beside the stretcher, one arm glued to his chest.

"What happened? We got through all right?"

The sergeant grinned faintly. "Almost whole, sir. Nineteen dead, thirty-three wounded and that for nearly a hundred lizards, we showed them this time all right. They never figured we could creep up behind *them*, although they didn't seem the same somehow, acted like they were half asleep until we were right among them. Not that they didn't fight then, although this was my own fault." He gestured to his injured arm. "Tried to strangle one of the little reptiles, forgot they ain't got throats but breathe through holes under their arms."

Bruce only half heard the rest of the man's words. Darkness was creeping into his mind again and he was lost in thoughts of his own. They'd got through, executed an impossible manoeuvre and turned annihilation into victory. Kenton was somehow tied up with it, when he'd been treated, when he was getting better, got to ask Kenton—got to find—ask Kenton—got—

"You wanted to see me?" Kenton sat down beside the bed.

Bruce smiled. It was a genuine smile and his eyes held no reserve. "Sorry I can't shake hands, still a bit tied up. First, I owe you a sincere apology and, second, if I don't get all these questions off my chest I shall lie awake another night and the Chief Med is threatening me with all sorts of drugs."

Kenton smiled. "What do you want to know?"

"A hell of a lot. For instance, why didn't their main force overtake us? They make double our speed."

Kenton leaned back in his chair. "We—cast a spell, remember?"

Bruce frowned. "That contraption of wood, what the hell was it?"

"Well, it goes back too far in the past for us to trace but, from the period from which we dug it, it was supposed to call up the devil."

"And did it? Call up the devil, I mean."

Kenton lit a cigarette, thoughtfully. "In those days, it was drawn on the ground in coloured chalk and the operator went through an elaborate ceremony first. But in answer to your question, yes, it probably did. The operator's conception of the devil anyway. Needless to say, the experience was purely subjective, what might be termed reflected imagination due to hypnosis. The design, you see, the lopsided squares and crazy triangles, have an hypnotic effective on the mind and, at the same time, stimulate the imagination."

"You mean it actually effected the Seth?"

"Why not? All intelligent life is susceptible to hypnosis."

"What was the actual effect on the Seth?"

"Probably a mild temporary psychosis. That is why I told you not to look at what I was doing directly. The Seth were probably beset by uncertainty, suspecting traps where no traps existed, mines in clear ground and so on. For an hour or so, their progress was probably far slower than our own."

Bruce raised himself on one elbow. "I assume you hypnotised the major too."

"On the contrary, Major Penrose was perfectly alive to what he was doing. It went against his nature to dig in and suffer annihilation. When he was presented with a plan which seemed feasible, he jumped at it. My only contribution was to infer, by suggestion, that he had thought it out for himself. An hypnotic, in any case would have been useless. In combat a man needs all his freedom of will."

Bruce shook his head slowly. It's almost unbelievable. One more question, just what did that shouting do?"

Kenton laughed softly. "That's a long story but I'll make it as brief as possible. An archaeological team discovered the remains of an ancient civilisation in central Brazil just prior to the war. Among the things they dug out was a curious spiral trumpet which, when blown, was found to set up peculiar vibrations directly effecting the ear. Subsequent experiments showed that continual blowing set up vibrations in the ear drum and surrounding bones directly effecting the mind. When the war came and the Corps was formed, the trumpet was borrowed for experimental purposes, its notes recorded and the impact on the mind studied by a team of psychiatrists. The results lead to what might be termed a sonic weapon but it was obviously impracticable to furnish Corps specialists with trumpets, so the experts turned to the simplest projector of all—the human voice. It was discovered that, en masse, similar results could be achieved and it was then only a question of simplification and test. It sounds simple when I tell it but actually development took six years and countless recordings."

Bruce shook his head again. "And what, precisely, does this sound do?"

Kenton frowned thoughtfully. "Its effect is twofold. It has a soporific effect on the mind of the recipient coupled with a general dulling of normal senses and a stimulating and exciting effect on those in the immediate vicinity of the sound. This trumpet, you see, was not a musical instrument but a special weapon, a device employed in a battle."

Bruce leaned back on his pillow, eyes clouded with thought. In his mind he was seeing the Seth in the hollow below him, unmoving like lizards in the sun and they *had* been half asleep. He saw the main body come swinging into the valley, shoulders back, marching perfectly like a conquering army. "Good God!" he said, aloud. "You knew the attack would come off because that row practically doped the Seth."

Kenton laughed. "Say I *hoped* it would come off." He rose slowly, pushing back his chair. "Remember the magic formula I gave you—the scrapings of the goodly sword and so on? Ever thought that my magic could be like that? Not real magic but a lost science. After all, it has never been *proved* that man evolved and had his beginning on Earth. Scientists

still argue about the missing link. Perhaps man came to Earth from a distant star, began colonisation and then, through war or catastrophe, found himself alone. No more supply ships, the people fighting desperately to stay alive, sinking to barbarism." He paused. "The old sciences, the mental sciences, are slowly forgotten, the new physical sciences develop from the fight against a savage and hostile environment. Think about it, if the Seth had come four years later, it might have been this planet, it was scheduled for colonisation. God knows what would have been forgotten and what new sciences developed in a few thousand years of complete isolation."

In his quarters, Major Penrose pondered over his report. He had a strong sense of justice and he felt almost under an obligation to Kenton. His past rudeness to the Lieutenant was unforgivable and inspired solely by bitterness and prejudice.

'The success of assault,' he wrote in his neat, rather cramped writing, 'was almost wholly due to Lieutenant Kenton, Corps of Magicians.'

He paused, staring at the words. "Corps of Magicians" looked singularly ridiculous on paper. Should he put C of M, or would the War Office send a chit demanding an explanation?

He leaned back in his chair, frowning and, in a sudden flash of insight, saw reasons behind the name. In that moment he was one with the War Office and saw even more than Kenton himself. The title, "Corps of Magicians" was chosen, not maliciously or even in mockery, but for particular and precise reasons.

In the Seth culture, there was no religion, no mysticism and no superstition. Consequently, the Terran word 'magic' had no applicable parallel in the Seth language. The War Office, therefore, was working to a definite plan. Already, in enemy records, there must be countless, if minor instances, of certain victory—as recently—turned into overwhelming defeat. Such instances must be worrying the alien intelligence services considerably and slowly undermining morale.

It was known, from captured enemy equipment, that the Seth possessed radar-detection instruments of unbelievable sensitivity. Instruments capable of 'listening in' to conversations miles distant.

A minor battle had been lost, why? The Seth listened intently. The Terrans had a secret weapon called magic and a special combat corps called magicians. From the contemp-

tuous remarks, the jeering references, which the Seth had undoubtedly overheard, the Terrans didn't believe in it either. There was no such thing as magic and this Special Corps was an object of derision.

Major Penrose smiled to himself, the Seth intelligence service must be a very worried body indeed. He shook his head, thoughtfully. Kenton was no doubt a brilliant man in his own particular field but the real magicians were the planners at the War Office.

It was a pity, however, that a few of the high ranking officers were denied the information, he might have dealt the enemy a knock-out.

His mind turned to possible future plans. He'd use Kenton properly next time and hit the enemy where it hurt most. He glanced at the map. An attack on Spike Ridge, for example, taking the enemy's nearest strongpoint from the rear? No, to do that, he must make a feint attack on Yellow river, points almost a hundred miles apart. Kenton couldn't operate on two fronts at once, he might have a lot of cards up his sleeve yet, but, after all, the fellow wasn't a magician . . .

Philip E. High

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## THE LITERARY LINE-UP

Accurately forecasting the contents of the January published issue in any year is seldom possible because the December published goes to press somewhat earlier owing to the Christmas holiday always falling near to our regular publication date. Those extra two weeks can produce a number of story acceptances which might change the scheduled contents. However, you can be sure that the final instalment of Philip K. Dick's serial "Time Out Of Joint" will come to its surprising breath-taking conclusion.

Definitely scheduled will be a novelette by Colin Kapp entitled "Enigma," which will live up to the high reputation this author is building. And a new E. C. Tubb short story for certain. After a long absence author Tubb is back in the field and we have several stories already on hand.

*On the surface everything is completely normal in the small mid-West town where Ragle Gumm earns a living unravelling the daily newspaper puzzle, but more and more odd incidents keep occurring which bear no relation to the Time factor.*

# TIME OUT OF JOINT

by PHILIP K. DICK

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Part Two of Three Parts

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## FOREWORD

*Time : 1959.*

*Location : a typical small town somewhere in the American middle west.*

*Characters : Ragle Gumm, 42-years old, ex-Army weather man, lives with his sister Margo and brother-in-law Victor Nielson and their small son Sammy. Nearby neighbours are Bill and Junie Black who spend most of their spare time in the Neilson's, while on the street corner lives Mrs. Kay Keitelbein, in charge of local Civil Defence. The last of the central characters is Mr. Lowery, a representative of the local newspaper, the Gazette.*

*The story so far : The setting is normal everyday small-town life. Vic Nielson manages a large down-town grocery store, while Bill Black, a social climber, is an executive on the City Water Development Corporation. Margo Nielson spends much of her time on civic duties, notably trying to have a large ruined site in the centre of the city cleared as it is a hazard for children who play there. Ragle Gumm, who occasionally casts an appreciative eye over attractive Junie Black, earns a living by solving a daily newspaper contest entitled "Where Will The Little Green Man Be Next?" From obscure clues supplied he pinpoints his answer in space and time. Because of his constant success a certain amount of collusion has crept in between himself and the Gazette newspaper and Mr. Lowery occasionally calls to settle minor difficulties.*

*Some off-trail mysteries in this everyday life are apparent, however. The current Book Club choice, for instance, is Uncle Tom's Cabin ; one car—the Tucker—does not fit the automotive pattern of 1959 ; Vic Nielson gropes for a light cord in a house where there are only switches ; Junie Black walks up three steps where there are only two ; rumbling noises are heard from a cloudless sky ; and Sammy Nielson is making a crystal radio set in a community where only TV is used.*

*Pursuing his daytime friendship with Junie Black in the local park, Ragle has a frightening experience—while waiting at a soft-drink stand it suddenly disintegrates before his eyes and in its place he finds a slip of paper with printing on it. He places it with five others he has accumulated under strange circumstances. As the world returns to his vision he wonders if he is losing his sanity and decides that he ought to get away from the city for a few days.*

*That evening Sammy shows him some old papers he has found while playing in the ruins. Ragle recognises the printing as being similar to that on the slips he has collected and later that night visits the ruins and digs up some more. Intrigued by the strangely named telephone exchanges in the book he has found he tries dialling some of the numbers but in each instance only gets an exchange operator. The magazines are even more inexplicable—he, Margo and Vic puzzle over the picture of an unknown film star named Marilyn Monroe, but Bill Black says that he has heard of her and borrows the magazines and the telephone book to do some checking. He telephones Lowery and tells him of the find—and they wonder if Ragle is becoming sane again !*

## six

The next day, after he arrived home from school, Sammy Nielson carried his still-malfunctioning crystal set from the house, through the back yard, to the locked clubhouse.

Over the door of the clubhouse was a sign his dad had got for him down at the store. The man who did the lettering for the store had made it.

NO FASCISTS, NAZIS, COMMUNISTS,  
FALANGISTS, PERONISTS, FOLLOWERS  
OF HLINKA AND/OR BELA KUN ALLOWED

Both his father and his uncle insisted that it was the best sign to have, so he nailed it up.

With his key he unlocked the padlock on the door and carried the crystal set inside. After he was in he bolted the door after him, and, with a match, lit the kerosene lantern. Then he removed the plugs from the peep-slots in the walls and watched for a time to see if any of the enemy was sneaking up on him.

Nobody could be seen. Only the empty back yard. Washing hanging from the line next door. Dull grey smoke from an incinerator.

He placed himself at the table, strapped the set of earphones over his head, and began dipping the cat's whisker against the crystal. Each time, he heard static. Again and again he dipped it, and at last he heard—or imagined he heard—faint tinny scratchy voices. So he left the cat's whisker where it was and began slowly running the bead along the tuning coil. One voice separated itself from the others, a man's voice, but too faint for the words to be made out.

Maybe I need more antenna, he thought.

More wire.

Leaving the clubhouse—locked—he roamed about the yard, searching for wire. He poked his head into the garage. At the far end was his dad's workbench. He started at one end of the bench and by the time he reached the other he had found a great roll of uninsulated steelish-looking wire that probably was for hanging up pictures or for a wire clothesline if his dad ever got around to putting it up.

They won't mind, he decided.

He carried the picture wire to the clubhouse, climbed the side of the clubhouse to the roof, and attached the wire to the antenna that came up from the crystal set. Out of the two wires he made one vast antenna which trailed the length of the yard.

Maybe it ought to be high, he decided.

Finding a heavy spike he tied the free end of the antenna to it, got his throwing arm limbered up, and then heaved the spike up on to the roof of the house. The antenna drooped. That won't do, he thought. It should be tight.

Returning to the house he climbed the stairs to the top floor. One window opened on to the flat part of the roof; he unlatched that window and in a moment he was scrambling out onto the roof.

He tied the end of his antenna to the metal pipe of the TV mast, and that was that. Quickly he crawled back inside the house, through the window, and ran downstairs and out into the yard to the clubhouse.

Shortly he had seated himself at the table, before the crystal set, and was running the bead along the tuning coil.

This time, in his earphones, the man's voice could be heard clearly. And a whole raft of other voices babbled in; his hands shook with excitement as he tuned them apart. From them he picked the loudest.

A conversation of some kind was in progress. He had got it part way through.

"... those long kind that look like sticks of bread. Practically break your front teeth when you bite on them. I don't know what they're for. Weddings maybe, where there's a lot of people you don't know and you want the refreshments to last . . ."

The man talked leisurely, the words spaced far apart.

"... not the hardness but the anise. It's in everything, even in the chocolate ones. There's one kind, white, with walnuts. Always makes me think of those bleached skulls you find out on the desert . . . rattlesnake skulls, jackrabbit skulls . . . small mammals. What a picture, right? Sink your teeth into a fifty-year-old rattlesnake skull . . ." The man laughed, still leisurely, almost an actual ha-ha-ha-ha. "Well, that's about all, Leon. Oh, one more thing. You know that thing your brother Jim said about ants going faster on hot days? I looked that up and I can't find anything about that. You ask

him if he's sure, because I went out back and looked at ants for a couple of hours since I talked to you last, and when it got good and hot they looked to be walking around at about the same speed."

I don't get it, Sammy thought. He tried further.

Squeaks and hissing made him wince. Then frantic dot-dot noises. Code, he knew. Morse code. Probably from a sinking ship in the Atlantic, with the crew trying to row through the flaming oil.

The next one was better.

" . . . at 3:36 exactly. I'll track it for you." A long silence. "Yes, I'll track it from this end. You just sit tight." Silence. "Yes, you sit tight. Got me?" Silence. "Okay, wait for it. What?" Long, long silence. "No, more like 2.8. 2.8. You got that? North East. Okay, Okay. Right."

He looked at his Mickey Mouse wristwatch. The time was just about 3:36; his watch ran a little off, so he couldn't be sure.

Just then, in the sky above the clubhouse, a remote rumble made the objects around him shudder. And at the same time the voice in his earphones said,

"Did you get it? Yes, I see it changing direction. Okay, that's all for this afternoon. Up to full, now. Yes. Okay. Signing off."

The voice ceased.

Hot dog, Sammy said to himself. Wait'll Dad and Uncle Ragle hear this.

Removing his earphones he ran from the clubhouse, across the yard, into the house.

"Mom!" he shouted, "where's Uncle Ragle? Is he in the living room working?"

His mother was in the kitchen scrubbing the drainboard. "Ragle went to mail off his entry," she said. "He finished up early."

"Oh stunk!" Sammy shouted, devastated.

"All right, young man," his mother said.

"Aw," he muttered. "I got a rocket ship or something on my crystal set; I wanted him to hear it." He whirled about in a circle, not knowing what to do.

"Do you want me to listen?" his mother said.

"Okay," he said grudgingly. He started from the house and his mother followed along with him.

"I can only listen for a couple of minutes," she said. "And then I have got to get back in the house; I have a lot to do before dinner."

At four o'clock Ragle Gumm mailed his registered package of entries at the main post office. Two hours ahead of the dead-line, he told himself. Shows what I can do when I have to.

He took a cab back to the block in which he lived, but he did not get off in front of the house ; he got off at the corner, by the rather old two-storey house, painted grey, with a leaning front porch.

Climbing the steep flight of steps to the porch he rang one of the three brass doorbells. Far off, past the lace curtains on the door, down the long, high-ceiling corridor, a chime rang.

A shape approached. The door opened.

"Oh, Mr. Gumm," Mrs. Keitelbein said. "I forgot to tell you what day the class meets."

"That's right," he said. "I was walking by and I thought I'd go up the steps and ask you."

Mrs. Keitelbein said, "The class meets twice a week. At two on Tuesday and three on Thursday. That's easy to remember."

With caution, he said, "Have you had good luck signing people up?"

"Not too awfully good," she said, with a wry smile.

"Offhand," he said, "can you recall anybody I might know who's signed up? It would give me confidence if I knew somebody in the class."

"I'd have to look in my book," she said. "Do you want to step inside and wait while I look?"

"Surely," he said.

Mrs. Keitelbein passed down the corridor, into the room at the end. When she did not reappear he followed.

The size of the room surprised him ; it was a great drafty empty auditorium-like place, with a fireplace that had been converted to a gas heater, an overhead chandelier, chairs pushed together in a group at one end, and a number of yellow-painted doors on one side and high wide windows on the other. At a bookshelf, Mrs. Keitelbein stood holding a ledger, the kind bookkeepers usually used.

"I can't find it," she said disarmingly, closing the ledger. "I have it written down, but in all the confusion—" She gestured at the disorderly room. "We're trying to get it set up for the first meeting. Chairs, for instance. We're short on chairs. And we need a blackboard . . . but the grammar school has promised us one." Suddenly she caught hold of his arm.

"Listen, Mr. Gumm," she said. "There's a heavy oak desk I want to get upstairs from the basement. I've been trying to get somebody all day long to come in and help Walter—my son—get it upstairs. Do you think you could take one end? Walter thinks that two men could get it up here in a few minutes. I tried to lift one end but I couldn't."

"I'd be glad to," he said. He took off his coat and laid it over the back of a chair.

A gangling, grinning teen-ager ambled into the room; he wore a white cheer-leader sweater, blue jeans, and shiny black oxfords. "Hi," he said shyly.

Three times they had to set the desk down on the stairs, once for Ragle to rest, twice because the desk failed to clear the top and had to be taken in a different grip. At last they had it up and into the big drafty room; with a thump the desk dropped from their stiff fingers, and that was that.

"I certainly do appreciate your kindness," Mrs. Keitelbein said, emerging from the basement and switching off the stair-light. "I hope you didn't hurt yourself or anything. It's heavier than I thought."

Her son was contemplating him with the same shyness as before. "You're the Mr. Gumm who's the contest winner?" he asked.

"Yes," Ragle said.

The boy's kindly face clouded over with embarrassment. "Maybe I shouldn't ask you this, but I always wanted to ask some guy who wins a lot of money in a contest . . . do you think of it as luck, or do you think of it like earning a big fee, the way a lawyer gets a big fee if he's got something on the ball no other lawyer has? Or like some old painters whose paintings are worth millions."

"It's a lot of hard work," Ragle said. "That's how I think of it. I put in eight to ten hours a day."

The boy nodded. "Oh yeah. I see what you mean."

"How did you get started?" Mrs. Keitelbein asked him.

Ragle said, "I don't know. I saw it in the paper and I sent in an entry. That was close to three years ago. I just drifted into it. My entries won right from the start."

"Mine didn't," Walter said. "I never won once; I entered around fifteen times."

Mrs. Keitelbein said, "Mr. Gumm, before you go I have something I want to give you. You wait here." She hurried off into a side room. "For helping."

He thought, Probably a cookie or two.

But when she returned she had a brightly-coloured decal. "For your car," she said, holding it out to him. "It goes on the back window. A CD sticker ; you dip it in warm water, and then the paper slides off and you slide the emblem on the car window." She beamed at him.

"I don't currently have a car," he said.

Her face showed dismay. "Oh," she said.

With a braying, but good-natured, laugh, Walter said, "Hey, maybe he could paste it onto the back of his coat."

"I'm so sorry," Mrs. Keitelbein said, in confusion. "Well, thank you anyhow ; I wish I could reward you, but I can't think how. I'll try to make the classes as interesting as I can ; how's that ?"

"Swell," he said. Picking up his coat he moved toward the hall. "I have to be going," he said. "I'll see you Tuesday, then. At two."

In a corner of the room, on a window seat, somebody had built a model of some sort. Ragle stopped to inspect it.

"We'll be using that," Mrs. Keitelbein said.

"What is it ?" he said. It appeared to be a representation of a military fort : a hollow square in which tiny soldiers could be viewed at their duties. The colours were greenish brown and grey. Touching the miniature gun-barrel that stuck up from the top of it, he discovered that it was carved wood. "Quite real," he said.

Walter said, "We built a bunch of those. The earlier classes, I mean. CD classes last year, when we lived in Cleveland. Mom brought them along ; I guess nobody else wanted them." He laughed his braying laugh again. It was more nervous than unkind.

"That's a replica of a Mormon fort," Mrs. Keitelbein said.

"I'll be darned," Ragle said. "I'm interested in this. You know, I was in World War Two; I was over in the Pacific."

"I dimly remember reading that about you," Mrs. Keitelbein said. "You being such a celebrity . . . every once in a while I come across a little article about you in one of the magazines. Don't you hold some sort of record as the longest contest winner of any of the newspaper or TV contests ?"

"I suppose so," he said.

Walter said, "Did you see heavy fighting in the Pacific ?"

"No," he said candidly. "Another fellow and I were stuck on a hunk of dirt with a few palm trees and a corrugated-iron shack and a radio transmitter and weather-measuring instruments. He measured the weather and I transmitted the information to a Navy installation a couple hundred miles to the south of us. That took about an hour a day. The rest of the day I lay around trying to figure out the weather. I used to try to predict what it would be like. That wasn't our job ; all we did was send them readings and they did the predicting. But I got pretty good. I could look up at the sky and that plus the readings gave me enough to go on, so my guesses worked out more times than not."

"I imagine weather conditions were of prime importance to the Navy and Army," Mrs. Keitelbein said.

He answered, "A storm could wreck a landing operation, scatter a convoy of supply carriers. Change the course of the war."

"Maybe that's where you got your practice," Walter said. "For the contest. Making book on the weather."

At that, Ragle laughed. "Yes," he said. "That's what he and I did ; we made book on it. I'd say it was going to rain at ten o'clock and he'd bet me it wouldn't. We managed to fritter away a couple of years doing that. That, and drinking beer. When they brought in our supplies once a month they left off a standard ration of beer—standard, we figured, for a platoon. Only trouble was, we had no way to cool it. Warm beer, day after day." How it took him back to remember all that. Twelve, thirteen years ago . . . He had been thirty-three years old. An employee in a steam laundry when the draft-notice showed up in the mailbox.

"Hey, Mom," Walter said excitedly. "I got a real good idea ; what about Mr. Gumm talking to the class about his military experiences ? He could give them a sense of participation ; you know, the immediacy of the danger and all that. He probably remembers a whole bunch of training they gave the GIs about safety and what to do under fire and emergency situations."

Ragle said, "That's about all there is ; what I told you."

"But you remember stories the other guys swapped, about air-raids and bombings," Walter persisted. "They don't have to actually have happened to you."

Kids are all about the same, Ragle thought. This boy talked along the lines Sammy talked. Sammy was ten ; this boy was,

say, sixteen. But he liked both of them. And he took it as a compliment.

Fame, he thought. This is my reward for being the greatest—or longest—winner in the history of puzzle contests. Boys between the ages of ten and sixteen think I'm somebody.

At five-thirty, when the store had been closed and locked up, Vic Nielson called the three or four checkers over together.

"Listen," he said. All day he had been planning this out. The window shades were down ; the customers had left. At the registers one of the store's assistant managers had started counting the money and setting the tapes for tomorrow. "I want you people to do me a favour. It's a psychological experiment. It'll only take thirty seconds. Okay?" Especially he appealed to Liz ; she was the power among the checkers, and if she said okay the others probably would.

The other checkers, male, small, watched Liz for her reaction. They still had on their white aprons, and their pencils behind their ears.

"All right," she said. Wagging her finger at him she said, "But you better be telling the truth ; we better be right out of here."

He walked over to the produce department, shook a paper bag loose from one of the bins, and began blowing it up. Liz and the other checkers gazed at him dully.

"What I want you to do is this," he said, throttling the full bag of air. "I'm going to pop this bag and then I'm going to yell a command at you. I want you to do exactly what I say ; don't think about it—just do it when you hear me yell it. I want you to react without giving it any time. You understand what I mean?"

Chewing on a piece of gum that she had pilfered from the candy and gum rack, Liz said, "Yeah, we understand. Go on, pop and yell."

"Face me," he said. The four of them stood with their backs to the wide glass exit door. It was the only door through which any of them passed to get into and out of the store. "Okay," he said, and, lifting up the bag, yelled, "Run!" And then he popped it. As he yelled, the four of them jumped slightly, startled. When the bag popped—its noise in the empty store was terrific—the four of them bolted like hares.

None of them ran toward the door. As a group they ran directly left, toward an upright support pillar. Six, seven, eight

steps at it . . . and then they halted, wheezing and disconcerted.

"Now what's this?" Liz demanded. "What's this about? You said you were going to pop the bag first, and then you went ahead and you yelled first."

"Thanks, Liz," he said. "That's fine. You can go meet your boy friend."

As they filed out of the store, the checkers gave him a look of scorn.

The assistant manager, counting money and setting tape, said to him, "Did you mean for me to run, too?"

"No," he said, only half-hearing him; his mind was on his experiment.

"I tried to duck down under the register," the assistant manager said.

"Thanks," he said.

After saying good night to the assistant manager he walked down to the corner and caught a bus. Soon he was riding home along with shoppers and employees, old ladies and school children.

A city ordinance forbade smoking in a public conveyance, but he felt disturbed enough to light a cigarette. By opening the window next to him he managed to get the smoke to go out, and not into the face of the woman next to him.

My experiment was a whizzer, he said to himself. It worked better than I wanted.

He had assumed that the checkers would scatter in various directions, one toward the door, one toward the wall, one away from the door. That would have supported his theory that this situation, in which they found themselves, was in some manner episodic. That a good part of their lives had been spent elsewhere and in an elsewhere that none of them remembered.

But—each should have had his own reflexes. Not the same for all four of them. They had all bolted in the same direction. It had been the wrong direction, but it had been uniform. They had acted as a group, not as individuals.

That meant, simply, that the prior and substantial experiences of the four had been similar.

How could that be?

His theory didn't cover that.

And, smoking his cigarette and manoeuvring the smoke out the bus window, he could not immediately concoct another theory.

Except, he realized, some mediocre explanation ; for instance, that the four checkers had attended some sort of function together. They might have lived in a boardinghouse together, or eaten in the same cafe over a period of years, been in school together . . .

We have a hodge-podge of leaks in our reality, he said to himself. A drop here, a couple of drops over in that corner. A moist spot forming on the ceiling. But where's it getting in ? What's it mean ?

He put his mind into rational order. Let's see how I came across it, he said to himself. I ate too much lasagne, and I hurried away from a poker game, in which I held a medium-fair hand, to take a pill in a dark bathroom.

Is there anything previous to that ?

No, he decided. Previous to that it's a sunny universe. Kids romping, cows mooing, dogs wagging. Men clipping lawns on Sunday afternoon, while listening to the ball game on TV. We could have gone on forever. Noticed nothing.

Except, he realized, Ragle's hallucination.

And what, he wondered, is the hallucination ? Ragle had never quite got around to telling him.

But it goes something along the lines of my experience, he said to himself. Somehow, in some manner, Ragle found himself poking through reality. Enlarging the hole. Or been faced with its enlargement, perhaps a splitting rent opening up, a great gash.

We can put everything we know together, he realized, but it doesn't tell us anything, except that something is wrong. And we knew that to start with. The clues we are getting don't give us a solution ; they only show us how far-reaching the wrongness is.

I think, though, he thought, we made a mistake in letting Bill Black walk off with that phone book.

Maybe, he thought, if I squeeze my eyes darn near shut, so just a crack of light shows, and I concentrate like hell on this bus, on the weary, hefty old women shoppers with their bulging shopping bags, and the chattering schoolgirls, and the clerks reading the evening paper, and the red-necked driver, maybe they'll all go away. The squeaking seat under me. The

smelly fumes every time the bus starts up. The jolting. The swaying. The ads over the windows. Maybe it'll just fade away . . .

With a start, he awoke. He had drifted off.

Self-hypnosis, he declared. Nodding off into a doze, like the other passengers around him. Heads lolling together, in time to the motion of the bus. Left, right. Forward. Sideways. Right. Left. The bus stopped at a light. The heads remained on an even angle.

And then, through his half-closed eyes, he saw the passengers fade away.

Lo and behold ! he thought. How pleasant it was.

No. It wasn't fading at all.

The bus and its passengers hadn't faded a bit. Throughout the bus a deep change had begun taking place, and like his experiment in the store it did not fit ; it was not what he wanted.

Damn you, he thought. Fade away !

The sides of the bus became transparent. He saw out into the street, the sidewalk and stores. Thin support struts, the skeleton of the bus. Metal girders, an empty hollow box. No other seats. Only a strip, a length of planking, on which upright featureless shapes like scarecrows had been propped. They were not alive. The scarecrows lolled forward, back, forward, back. Ahead of him he saw the driver ; the driver had not changed. The red neck. Strong, wide back. Driving a hollow bus.

The hollow men, he thought. We should have looked up poetry.

He was the only person on the bus, outside of the driver.

The bus actually moved. It moved through town, from the business section to the residential section. The driver was driving him home.

When he opened his eyes wide again, all the nodding people had returned. The shoppers. The clerks. The school children. The noise and smells and chatter.

Nothing works right, he thought to himself.

The bus honked at a car pulling from a parking slot. All had become normal.

Experiments, he thought. Suppose I had fallen through to the street ? With fear he thought, Suppose I had ceased to exist, too ?

*Is this what Ragle saw ?*

## seven

When he got home, there was not a soul in the house. For an instant he was overcome by panic. *No*, he thought. "Margo!" he called.

All the rooms were deserted. He wandered about, trying to keep control of himself.

And then he noticed that the back door was open.

Going out into the back yard he looked around. Still no sign of them. Ragle or Margo or Sammy; none of them.

He walked down the path, past the clothesline, past the rose arbour, to Sammy's clubhouse built against the back fence.

As soon as he rapped on the door a peep-slot slid open and his son's eye appeared. "Oh, hello, Dad," Sammy said. At once the door was unbolted and held open for him.

Inside the clubhouse, Ragle sat at the table, the earphones on his head. Margo sat beside him, at a great sheaf of paper. Both of them had been writing; sheet after sheet was covered with rapid jottings.

"What's going on?" Vic said.

Margo said, "We're monitoring."

"So I see," he said. "But what are you bringing in?"

Ragle, with the earphones still on his head, turned and with a gleam in his eye said, "We're picking them up."

"Who?" Vic said. "Who's 'them'?"

"Ragle says it may take years to find out," Margo said, her face animated, her eyes bright. Sammy stood stock-still, in a trance of ecstasy; the three of them were in a state he had never witnessed before. "But we have a way of overhearing them," she said. "And we've already started keeping notes. Look." She pushed the sheaf of paper at him. "Everything they say; we're writing it all down."

"Ham operators?" Vic said.

"That," Ragle said. "And communication between ships and their field; evidently there's a field very close to here."

"Ships," Vic echoed. "You mean ocean ships?"

Ragle pointed up.

Christ, Vic thought. And he felt, then, the same tension and wildness. The frenzy.

"When they go over," Margo said, "they come in strong and clear. For about a minute. Then they fade out. We can hear them talking, not just signals but conversation. They kid a lot."

"Great kidders," Ragle said. "Jokes all the time."

"Let me listen," Vic said.

When he had seated himself at the table, Ragle passed the earphones to him and fitted them over his head. "You want me to tune it?" Ragle said. "I'll tune, and you just listen. When a signal comes in good and clear, tell me. I'll leave the bead at that point."

A signal came in presently. Some man giving information about some industrial process. He listened, and then he said, "Tell me what you've figured out." He felt too impatient to listen; the voice droned on. "What can you tell?"

"Nothing yet," Ragle said, with no loss of satisfaction. "But don't you see? *We know they're there.*"

"We knew that already," Vic said. "Every time they flew over."

Both Ragle and Margo—and Sammy, too—seemed a little taken aback. After a pause, Margo glanced at her brother. Ragle said, "It's a hard concept to explain."

From outside the clubhouse a voice called, ". . . hayfeloz. Whirya."

Margo raised her hand warningly. They listened.

Someone, in the yard, was looking for them. Vic heard footsteps on the path. And then the voice again, this time closer:

"People?"

Softly, Margo said, "It's Bill Black."

Sammy slid back a peep-slot. "Yeah," he whispered. "It's Mr. Black."

Lifting his son aside, Vic got down and peeped through the peep-slot. Bill Black stood in the centre of the walk, obviously searching for them. On his face was an expression of aggravation and puzzlement. No doubt he had gone inside the house, finding it unlocked and nobody there.

"I wonder what he wants," Margo said. "Maybe if we keep quiet he'll go away. Probably wants us all to have dinner with them, or go out somewhere."

They waited.

Bill Black strolled about aimlessly, kicking at the grass. "Hey fellows!" he called. "Where the heck are you?"

Silence.

"I'd sure feel silly if he caught us hiding in here," Margo said, with a nervous laugh. "It's as if we were children or

something. He certainly looks funny, craning his neck like that, trying to spot us. As if he thought we were hiding in the tall grass."

Mounted on the wall of the clubhouse was a toy gun that Vic had given his son one Christmas. It had fins and coils sticking up from it, and the box had described it as a "Robot Rocket Blaster from the 23rd Century, Capable of Destroying Mountains." Sammy had scampered about clicking it for a few weeks, and then the spring had broken and the gun had gone up on the wall, trophy-like, to scare by its presence alone.

Vic lifted the gun down. He unlocked the clubhouse door, pushed it open, and stepped out.

Standing with his back to him, Bill Black called. "Hey, people! Where are you?"

Vic crouched down and held the gun up, pointed at Black. "You're a dead man," he said.

Spinning to face him, Black saw the gun. He blanched and half-raised his arms. Then he noticed the clubhouse, Ragle and Margo and Sammy peeping out, and the fins and coils and bright enamel of the gun. His hands dropped and he said, "Ha-ha."

"Ha-ha," Vic said.

"What were you doing?" Black said. From inside the Nielsons' house, Junie Black appeared. She descended the porch steps, slowly, to join her husband; both she and Bill frowned and drew together. She put her arm around his waist. Black said nothing, then.

"Hi," Junie said.

Margo stepped from the clubhouse. "What were you doing?" she asked Junie in a voice that any woman would shrink at. "Just making yourself at home in our house?"

The Blacks gazed at them.

"Oh come on," Margo said, standing with her arms folded. "Just make yourself at home."

"Take it easy," Vic said.

To him, his wife said, "Yes, they just walked right in. Into every room, I imagine. How did you find it?" she asked Junie. "Beds made properly? Any dust on the curtains? Find anything you liked?"

Ragle and Sammy came out of the clubhouse and joined Vic and his wife. The four of them faced Bill and Junie Black.

At last Black said, "I apologize for trespassing on your property. We wondered if you'd like to go bowling with us tonight."

Beside her husband, Junie smiled idiotically. Vic felt a little sorry for her. She had clearly no idea that she would offend anyone; probably she had not even been conscious of a transgression. In her sweater and blue cotton trousers, her hair tied up with a ribbon, she looked very cute and childlike.

"I'm sorry," Margo said. "But you shouldn't barge into other people's houses; you know that, Junie."

Junie drew back, flinching and unhinged. "I—" she murmured.

"I said I apologize," Black said. "What do you want, for Christ's sake?" He seemed equally perturbed.

Vic put out his hand and they shook hands. All was over.

"You stay if you want," Vic said to Ragle, indicating the clubhouse. "We'll go on inside and see about dinner."

"What do you have in there?" Black said. "I mean, if it's none of my business, tell me. But you're sure in a serious mood."

Sammy spoke up, "You can't come in the clubhouse."

"Why not?" Junie said.

"You're not members," Sammy said.

"Can we join?" Junie asked.

"No," Sammy said.

"Why not?"

"You just can't," Sammy said, glancing at his father.

"That's right," Vic said. "I'm sorry."

He and Margo and the Blacks walked up the steps, onto the back porch of the house. "We haven't had dinner," Margo said, still tense with hostility.

"We'll see you," Junie called, as Bill led her out of the house. "I hope you'll come." She smiled yearningly at them, and then the door shut after them.

"What a pill," Margo said. Opening the hot-water tap she ran water into a kettle.

Vic said, "A whole psychological technique could be erected on how people act when they're startled, before they have time to think."

As she fixed dinner, Margo said, "Bill Black just seems rational. He put up his hands until he saw it was only a toy gun and then he put them down again."

Vic said, "What are the chances of his wandering over at that particular moment?"

"One of them is always over here. You know how they are."

"True," he said.

In the locked clubhouse, Ragle Gumm sat with the earphones on, monitoring a strong signal and making occasional notes. Over the years, in his contest work, he had learned excellent systems of quick notation, all his own; as he listened he not only made a permanent record of what he heard but he also jotted down comments and ideas and reactions of his own. His ball-point pen—one that Bill Black had given him—flew.

Watching him, Sammy said, "You sure write fast, Uncle Ragle. Can you read it when you get finished?"

"Yes," he said.

The signal, beyond a doubt, emanated from the nearby landing field. He had got so he recognized the voice of the operator. What he wanted to find out was the nature of the traffic coming into and leaving the field. Where did they go? They shot overhead at terrific speed. How fast? Why did nobody in town know about the flights? Was it a secret military installation, some new experimental ships that the public was ignorant of? Reconnaissance missiles . . . tracking devices . . .

Sammy said, "I'll bet you helped crack the Japanese code during World War Two."

Hearing the boy say that, Ragle once again had a sudden and complete sensation of futility. Shut up in a child's clubhouse, an earphone pressed to his head, listening for hours to a crystal set built by a grammar-school child . . . listening to ham operators and traffic instructions like a school child himself.

I must be crazy, he said to himself.

I'm the man who's supposed to have fought in a war. I'm forty-six years old, supposedly an adult.

Yes, he thought. And I'm a man who lies around the house scrounging a living by filling out Where Will the Little Green Man Be Next? puzzles in a newspaper contest. While other adults have jobs, wives, homes of their own.

I'm a retarded—psychotic. Hallucinations. Yes, he thought. Insane. Infantile and lunatic. What am I doing, sitting here? Daydreams, at best. Fantasies about rocket ships shooting by overhead, armies and conspiracies. Paranoia,

A paranoiac psychosis. Imagining that I'm the centre of a vast effort by millions of men and women, involving billions of dollars and infinite work . . . a universe revolving around me. Every molecule acting with me in mind. An outward radiation of importance . . . to the stars. Ragle Gumm the object of the whole cosmic process, from the inception to final entropy. All matter and spirit, in order to wheel about me.

Sammy said, "Uncle Ragle, do you think you can crack their code, like the Japanese code?"

Rousing himself he said, "There's no code. They're just talking like anybody. It's some man sitting in a control tower watching military aircraft land." He turned toward the boy, who was watching him with fixed intensity. "Some fellow in his thirties who shoots pool once a week and enjoys TV. Like we do."

"One of the enemy," Sammy said.

With anger, Ragle said, "Forget that kind of talk. Why do you say that? It's all in your mind." My fault, he realized. I put it there.

In his earphones the voice said, ". . . all right, LF-3488. I have it down in corrected form. You can go ahead. Yes, you should be practically overhead."

The clubhouse shook.

"There one goes," Sammy said excitedly.

The voice continued, ". . . entirely clear. No, it's fine. You're passing over him now."

*Him, Ragle thought.*

". . . down there," the voice said. "Yes, you're looking down at Ragle Gumm himself. Okay, we have you. Let go."

The vibrations subsided.

"It's gone," Sammy said. "Maybe it landed."

Setting down the earphones, Ragle Gumm got to his feet. "You listen for a while," he said.

"Where are you going?" Sammy asked.

"For a walk," Ragle said. He unlocked the door of the clubhouse and stepped outside, into the fresh, brisk, evening air.

The kitchen light of the house . . . his sister and brother-in-law in the kitchen. Fixing dinner.

I'm leaving, Ragle said to himself. I'm getting out of here. I meant to before. Now I can't wait.

Walking carefully down the path around the side of the house, he reached the front porch ; he entered the house and got into his room without either Vic or Marge hearing him. There he gathered up all the money he could find in his assorted dresser drawers, clothes, unopened envelopes, change from a jar. Putting on a coat he left the house by the front door and walked rapidly off down the sidewalk.

A block or so away, a cab approached. He waved his arms and the cab stopped.

"Take me to the Greyhound bus station," he told the driver.

"Yes, Mr. Gumm," the driver said.

"You recognize me ?" Here it was again, the projection of the paranoiac infantile personality : the infinite ego. Everyone aware of me, thinking about me.

"Sure," the driver said, as he started up his cab. "You're that contest winner. I saw your picture in the paper and I remarked, Why, that guy lives right here in town. Maybe one day I'll pick him up in my cab."

So it was legitimate, Ragle thought. The odd blurring of reality and his insanity. Genuine fame, plus the fantasy fame.

When cab drivers recognize me, he decided, it's probably not in my mind. But when the heavens open and God speaks to me by name . . . that's when the psychosis takes over.

It would be hard to distinguish.

The cab moved along the dark streets, past houses and stores. At last, in the downtown business section, it drew up before a five-storey building and stopped at the curb.

"Here you are, Mr. Gumm," the driver said, starting to leap out to open the door.

Reaching into his coat for his wallet, Ragle stepped from the cab. He glanced up at the building as the driver reached for the bill.

In the street light the building was familiar. Even at night he recognized it.

It was the *Gazette* building.

Getting back into the cab he said, "I want to go to the Greyhound bus station."

"What ?" the driver said, thunderstruck. "Is that what you told me ? I'll be darned—of course it was." He jumped back in and started up the engine. "Sure, I remember. But we got to talking about that contest of yours, and I got to thinking about the newspaper." As he drove he swung his head around,

grinning back at Ragle. "I've got you so tied in with the *Gazette* in my mind—what a sap I am."

"It's okay," Ragle said.

They drove on and on. Eventually he lost track of the streets.

He had no idea where they were ; the nocturnal shapes of closed up factories lay off to the right, and what appeared to be railroad tracks. Several times the cab bucked and floundered as it passed over tracks. He saw vacant lots . . . an industrial district with no lights showing.

I wonder, Ragle thought. What would the cab driver say if I asked him to drive me out of town ?

Leaning forward he tapped the driver on the shoulder. "Hey," he said.

"Yes, Mr. Gumm," the driver said.

"What about driving me out of town ? Let's forget the bus."

"I'm sorry, sir," the driver said. "I can't get out on the road between towns. There's a rule against it. We're city carriers ; we can't compete with the bus line. It's an ordinance."

"You ought to be able to make a few extra bucks on the side. Forty-mile trip with your meter running—I'll bet you've done it, ordinance or no ordinance."

"No, I never done that," the driver said. "Some other drivers maybe, but not me. I don't want to lose my permit. If the highway patrol catches a city cab out on the highway, they haul it right down, and if it's got a fare in it, bam, there goes the driver's permit. A fifty-buck permit. And his livelihood."

To himself, Ragle thought, Are they out to keep me from leaving the town ? Is this a plot on their part ?

My lunacy again, he thought.

Or is it ?

How can I tell ? What proof do I have ?

A blue neon glow hung in the centre of a limitless flat field. The cab approached it and stopped at a curb. "Here we are," the driver said. "This is the bus station."

Opening the door, Ragle got out onto the sidewalk. The sign did not read Greyhound ; it read NONPAREIL COACH LINES.

"Hey," he said, jolted. "I said Greyhound."

"This is Greyhound," the cab driver said. "The same as. It's the bus line. There isn't any Greyhound here. The state only allows one bus line to be franchised for a town this size. Nonpareil got in here years ago, before Greyhound. Greyhound tried to buy them out, but they wouldn't sell. Then Greyhound tried—"

"Okay," Ragle said. He paid the fare, tipped the driver, and walked across the sidewalk to the square brick building, the only building for miles around. On each side of it weeds grew. Weeds and broken bottles . . . litter of paper. Deserted region, he thought. At the edge of town. Far off he could see the sign of a gas station, and beyond that street lights. Nothing else. The night air made him shiver as he opened the wooden door and stepped into the waiting room.

A great blast of racketey, distorted sound and tired blue air rolled out over him. The waiting room, packed with people, confronted him. A long line stood between him and the ticket window. He could see, without going any farther that it was not moving.

He closed the door after him and joined the line. Nobody paid any attention to him. This is one time I wish my psychosis would come true, he thought to himself. I'd like to have all this revolve around me, at least to the extent of making the ticket window available to me.

A half hour later he had moved forward only a few inches. And no one had left the window. Craning his neck, he tried to see the clerk behind the window. He could not. A wide, elderly woman in a black coat held the first place in line ; her back was to him and he assumed that she was involved in buying her ticket. But she did not finish. The transaction did not end. Behind her a thin middle-aged man in a double-breasted suit gnawed on a toothpick and looked bored. After him a young couple murmured together, intent on their own conversation. And after that the line merged into itself, and he could make out nothing but the back of the man ahead of him.

After forty-five minutes he still stood in the same spot. Can a lunatic go out of his mind ? he wondered. What does it take to get a ticket on the Nonpareil Lines ? Will I be here forever?

A growing fright began to settle over him. Maybe he would stand in this line until he died. Unchanging reality . . . the same man ahead of him, the same young soldier behind him,

the same unhappy, empty-eyed woman seated on the bench across from him.

Behind him, the young soldier stirred fitfully, bumped against him and muttered, "Sorry, buddy."

He grunted back.

The soldier locked his hands together and cracked his knuckles. He licked his lips and then he said to Ragle, "Hey, buddy, can I ask you a favour? Will you hold my place in line?" Before Ragle could answer, the soldier turned to the woman standing behind him. "Lady, I got to make sure my buddy's okay; can I get back in line here without losing my place?"

The woman nodded.

"Thanks," the soldier said, and pushed a passage through the people, over to the corner of the waiting room.

In the corner another soldier sat with his legs apart, his face resting on his knee, his arms hanging down. His compatriot dropped down next to him, shook him and began talking urgently to him. The bent-over soldier raised his head, and Ragle saw the bleary eyes and twisted, slack mouth of the drunk.

Poor guy, he thought to himself. Out on a toot. During his own days in the service he had several times wound up in a dismal bus station with a hangover, trying to get back to the base.

The soldier sprinted back to his place in line. Agitated, he plucked at his lip, glanced up at Ragle and said, "This here line; it isn't moving one bit. I think I must have been standing here since five this afternoon." He had a smooth young face, tormented now by anxiety. "I have to get back to my base," he said. "Phil and I have to be in by eight o'clock or we're AWOL."

To Ragle, he appeared to be eighteen or nineteen. Blonde, somewhat thin. Clearly, he of the two of them did the problem-solving.

"Too bad," Ragle said. "How far's your base?"

"It's the airfield up the highway," the soldier said. "The missile base, actually. Used to be an airfield."

Ragle thought, By god. Where those things take off and land. "You've been hitting the bars down here?" he said, in as conversational a voice as he could manage.

The soldier said, "Hell no, not in this jerkwater dump." His disgust was enormous. "No, we come all the way in from the Coast; we had a week furlough. Driving."

"Driving," Ragle repeated. "Well why are you in here?"

The young soldier said, "Phil's the driver; I can't drive. And he hasn't sobered up. It's just a crummy old jalopy. We dumped it. We can't wait around for him to sober up. Anyhow, it needs a new tyre. It's back along the road with a flat. It's only worth about fifty bucks; it's a '36 Dodge."

"If you had somebody who could drive," Ragle said, "would you go on by car?" I can drive, he was thinking.

The soldier, staring at him, said, "What about the tyre?"

"I'll chip in on it," he said. Taking hold of the soldier by the arm he led him out of the line and across the waiting room to his hunched-over buddy. The soldier, Phil, didn't look as if he could walk very far or very well. He appeared to understand only vaguely where he was.

To him, the soldier said, "Hey, Phil, this guy's going to drive. Give me the keys."

"Is that you, Wade?" Phil groaned from his coma.

At great length, Wade again explained the situation to him. Ragle, wandering about helplessly, wondered if he could stand it. Finally Wade picked up one of the suitcases and started off. To Ragle he said, "Let's get going. Take the other suitcase, or he'll leave it off and we'll never see it again."

"Somebody must have rolled me," Phil muttered.

They stumbled on and on. Ragle lost track of time and space; one street light grew, passed overhead flooding them temporarily with brilliant yellow light, and then died away behind them. The next one grew in its turn. They passed the vacant lot, and square inert factory buildings appeared instead. He and his two companions laboured across multiple tracks, one after another. To his right, concrete loading docks at shoulder-level hove close. Phil stumbled against one and came to rest against it, his head buried on his arm, evidently sound asleep.

Ahead, at the curb, a car attracted Ragle's attention.

"Is that it?" he said.

The two soldiers regarded the car. "I think so," Wade said excitedly. "Hey, Phil—ain't that the car?"

"Sure," Phil said.

The car sagged on one side. It had a flat. So they had found it.

"Now we got to get a tyre," Wade said, throwing the two suitcases into the back of the car. "Let's get the jack under it and get the wheel off and see what size tyre it takes."

In the trunk compartment he and Ragle found a jack. Phil had meanwhile wandered off ; they saw him standing a few yards away, his head back, staring up at the sky.

"He'll stand like that for an hour," Wade said, as they jacked up the car. "There's a Standard Station back aways ; we passed it just before the flat." Showing skill and experience, he got the wheel off and rolled it onto the sidewalk. Ragle followed. "Where's Phil ?" Wade said, looking around.

Phil was nowhere to be seen.

"God damn him," Wade said. "He must have rambled off."

Ragle said, "Let's get to the gas station. I don't have all night and neither do you."

"That's a fact," Wade said. "Well," he said philosophically, "maybe he'll come back and flop in the car and we'll find him there when we get back." He began rolling the tyre and wheel, at a good speed.

After a long hard interval of tramping along, they saw ahead of them the white and red and blue square of a Standard Station.

"Amen," Wade said. "You know," he said happily to Ragle, "I been walking along here praying like a bastard. And there it is." He rolled his tyre and wheel faster and faster, squalling a cry of triumph. "Come on !" he yelled back to Ragle.

In the station a clean-cut boy in the starched white uniform of the company watched them without interest.

"Hey, there, man," Wade said, shoving open the station house door. "You want to sell us a tyre ? Let's move it."

The boy put down a chart he had been working on, picked up a cigarette from an ash tray, and came over to see the tyre.

"What's this for ?" he asked Wade.

"Thirty-six Dodge sedan," Wade said.

The boy flashed a light on the tyre, trying to read the size. Then he got out a heavy ringed note-binder and leafed through the printed pages. It seemed to Ragle that he examined each page at least four different times, turning them first one way and then another. Finally he closed the note-binder and said, "Can't do you any good."

"What do you suggest, then ?" Ragle said patiently. "This soldier and his buddy have to be back at their base or they're AWOL."

The gas station attendant scratched his nose with his pencil and then he said, "There's a recap place up on the highway, about five miles."

"We can't walk five miles," Ragle said.

The attendant said, "I've got my Ford pick-up truck parked over there." He pointed with his pencil. "One of you stay here, and leave your wheel here. And the other of you can drive the pick-up over to the highway. It's a Seaside Station. At the first light. Bring the tyre back and I'll put it on here for you. It'll cost you six bits for me to put it on." He took down a set of car keys from the register and handed them to Ragle. "And," he said, "while you're up there, there's an all-night restaurant across the highway. You want to bring me back a fried ham and cheese sandwich and a malt."

"Any special kind of malt?" Ragle said.

"Pineapple, I guess." He handed Ragle a dollar bill.

"I'll stay here," Wade said. "Hurry back," he yelled after him.

"Okay," Ragle said.

A few minutes later he had backed the pick-up truck out onto the deserted street. Then he was driving in the direction the attendant had pointed. At last he saw the lights of the highway.

What a situation, he thought to himself.

## e i g h t

The young man wearing shorts and undershirt placed the end of a reel of tape, looped, into the slot of the reel-hub. He revolved the reel until the tape had caught, and then he pressed the key that started the transport. On the sixteen-inch screen a picture appeared. The young man seated himself on the edge of the bed to watch.

First, the picture showed a six-lane divided highway with white concrete pavement. In the centre strip bushes and grass grew. On each side of the highway billboards advertising retail products could be seen. Cars moved along the highway. One changed lanes. Another slowed to take advantage of a cut-off.

A yellow Ford pick-up truck appeared.

From the speaker of the tape machine a voice said, "That is a 1952 Ford pick-up truck."

"Yes," the young man said.

The truck, seen now from the side, showed its profile. Then it came at the screen. The young man noted it from the front.

Darkness descended. The truck switched on its headlights. The young man observed it from the front, side, and rear, its tail lights in particular.

Daylight returned to the screen. The truck moved along under sunlight. It changed lanes.

"The vehicle code requires a driver to make a hand-signal when he changes lanes," the voice said.

"Right," the young man said.

The truck stopped off on the gravel shoulder.

"The vehicle code requires that when a vehicle stops, the driver makes a hand-signal," the voice said.

The young man got up and went over to rewind the tape.

"I've got that down pat," he said to himself. He rewound the tape and put on another reel. While he was threading it, the telephone rang. From where he stood he called, "Hello."

The ringing stopped and from the wall a muted voice that he did not recognize said, "He's still standing in line."

"Okay," the young man said.

The phone clicked off. The young man finished threading the tape and started up the transport.

On the screen appeared the image of a man in uniform. Boots, brown pants stuffed into the boots, leather belt, pistol in holster, brown canvas shirt, necktie poking out his collar, heavy brown jacket, visored cap, sun-glasses. The man in uniform turned around, showing himself from several sides. Then he climbed onto a motorcycle, kicked the motor into life, and roared off.

The screen showed him riding along.

"Fine," the young man wearing shorts and undershirt said. He got out his electric shaver, snapped it on, and, watching the screen, finished shaving.

The highway patrol man on the screen began pursuing a car. After a while he caught up with the car and waved it to a stop at the side of the road. The young man, shaving reflexively, studied the expression on the highway patrolman's face.

The highway patrolman said, "All right, may I see your driver's license please?"

The young man said, "All right, may I see your driver's license please?"

The door of the trapped car opened and a middle-aged man wearing a white shirt and unpressed slacks got out, reaching into his pocket. "What's the matter, officer?" he said.

The highway patrolman said, "Are you aware that this is a limited speed zone, sir?"

The young man said, "Are you aware that this is a limited speed zone, sir?"

The driver said, "Sure, I was only doing forty-five, like it said back there on the sign." He passed his wallet to the highway patrolman, who took it and studied the license. On the screen a blow-up of the license appeared. It remained until the young man had finished shaving, dabbed after-shave lotion on his face, rinsed out his mouth with antibax, squirted deodorant under his arms, and started to find his shirt. Then the license vanished.

"Your license has expired, mister," the highway patrolman said.

As he slid his shirt from the hanger the young man said, "Your licence has expired, mister."

The telephone rang. He leaped over to the tape-transport, struck the idle-key, and called, "Hello."

From the wall the muted voice said, "He is now talking to Wade Schulmann."

"Okay," the young man said.

The phone clicked off. He started up the tape again, this time at fast forward wind. When he stopped it and returned it to the play position, the highway patrolman was walking around a car and saying to the lady driver,

"Would you please press down with your foot on the brake pedal."

"I don't see what this is all about," the lady driver said. "I'm in a hurry and this is a ridiculous inconvenience. I know a little about law, furthermore."

The young man tied his tie, looped his heavy leather belt, strapped on his pistol and holster. "I'm sorry, mister," he said as he stuck on his visored cap. "Your tail light isn't showing. You're not permitted to drive without a proper tail light. You'll have to park your car. Could I see your license?"

As he was putting on his coat, the telephone rang again.

"Hello," he said, peering at himself in the mirror.

"He's walking to the car with Wade Schulmann and Philip Burns," the muted voice said.

"Okay," the young man said. Going to the tape-transport he halted an inch of tape that showed the highway patrolmen, close-up, front-view, and then, at the mirror, he compared himself with him. Darn good, he decided.

"Now they're entering the Standard Station," the muted voice said. "Get ready to leave."

"I'm on my way," he said. He closed the door after him, walked up the dark concrete ramp to the parked motorcycle. Getting onto the seat he jumped with his full weight on the starter-pedal. The motor started. Hopping along he glided the motorcycle out onto the street, switched on the headlight, pressed the clutch down, put it in gear, let the clutch out as he gave the motor gas. With a loud noise the motor cycle moved forward ; he hung on inexpertly until it had gained speed, and then he relaxed and sat back. At the first intersection he turned right, toward the highway.

He had got onto the highway before he realized that he had forgotten something. What was it ? Some part of his uniform.

His sun-glasses.

Did he wear them at night ? As he rode along the highway, past the cars and trucks, he tried to remember. Maybe to cut down the glare from oncoming headlights. Holding onto the handlebar with one hand he reached into his coat pocket. There they were. He lifted them out and fitted them onto his nose.

How dark, with the sun-glasses in place. For a moment he saw nothing, only blackness.

Maybe it was a mistake.

Taking off the sun-glasses he experimented, watching the road through them and then not through them. On his left, a big vehicle of some kind moved up abreast with him. He paid little attention to it. A trailer with a car pulling it ; he speeded up his motorcycle to pass it. The trailer speeded up, too.

Damn, he said to himself. He had forgotten something, all right. His gloves. His bare hands, one gripping the handlebar, the other holding the sun-glasses, began to become numb with cold.

Time enough to go back ? No, he decided.

Squinting, he peered for a sight of the yellow Ford pick-up truck. It would enter the highway at the signal light.

On his left, the trailer had got up so that it was ahead of him. He became aware that gradually it was pulling into his lane. Christ, he thought. Putting away the sun-glasses, he steered his motorcycle into the lane to his right. A horn sounded ; there was a car directly on his right. He swerved back. At the same time, the trailer came sweeping at him. His

hand flew to the horn. What horn? Did motorcycles have horns? Sirens. He bent to switch on the siren.

When the siren wailed on, the trailer ceased to press at him. It returned to its own lane. And the car on his right gave him more clearance.

Noticing that, he felt more confidence.

By the time he spotted the yellow Ford pick-up truck, he had begun to enjoy his job.

As soon as he heard the siren behind him, Ragle knew that they had made up their minds to get him. He did not slow down. But he did not speed up. He waited until he could tell for certain that it was a cycle, not a car, that had got on his tail. And he saw only one of them.

Now I've got to use my sense of time and space, he said to himself. My masterful talent.

He sized up the traffic-pattern around him, the positions and speeds of the cars. Then, when he had it fixed in mind, he cut sharply into the lane to his left, between two cars. The one behind slowed; it had no choice. Without any fuss he had wedged the pick-up truck into a dense pack of traffic. Then, in rapid succession, he lane-hopped until he had got ahead of a massive two-section rig that hid him from anything following. Meanwhile, the siren continued to wail. Now he could not tell exactly where the cycle was. And, he thought, he's undoubtedly lost sight of me.

Between the rig and the sedan ahead of him, his tail lights could not be seen. And, at night, the cop had only the tail lights to go on.

All at once the motorcycle shot by in the lane to his left. The cop turned his head and identified him. But he could not get near the pick-up truck; he had to go on. Traffic had not stopped. The drivers could not tell who was being pursued; they thought the motorcycle meant to go farther on.

Now he'll wait for me, Ragle guessed. At once he changed lanes, cutting over to the left-hand lane, so that there were two lanes of traffic between him and the motorcycle. He'll be off on the shoulder. Ragle slowed down so that cars behind him felt forced to pass on the right. The traffic to his right became heavy.

Momentarily he glimpsed the motorcycle parked off on the gravel shoulder. The cop, in his uniform, peered back. He did not see the pick-up truck, and a moment later Ragle was

safe. Well past. Now he speeded up ; for the first time he shot ahead of the other traffic.

Soon he saw the signal light that he wanted.

But he did not see the Seaside Station that he had been told to look for.

Odd, he thought.

I had better get off the highway, he said to himself. So that I don't get flagged down again. No doubt there is something I've violated ; this truck doesn't have the proper-coloured reflector strips on its rear bumper or some such device. Anything for an excuse, so that the machinery can go into motion, and all the forces can close in around me.

I know it's my psychosis, he said to himself, but I still don't want to get caught.

Making a hand-signal, he left the highway. The truck bumped off onto a rutted dirt pasture. As soon as it had stopped moving he shut off the lights and the motor. Nobody will notice me, he said to himself. But where the hell am I ? And what do I do next ?

Craning his neck, he searched in vain for any sign of the Seaside Station. The cross street, at the light, vanished off into the darkness, lit up for only a few hundred yards. Nothing there. A minor route. This is the big road out of town.

Far off, up the highway, a single coloured neon sign could be made out.

I'll drive down there, he decided. Or can I take the risk of getting back on the highway ?

He waited until, looking back, he saw dense traffic. And then, gunning the motor, he shot out onto the road a split-second ahead of it. If any cop was coming, he wouldn't see one more tail light among all the others.

A moment later, Ragle identified the neon sign as that of a roadside tavern. A brief flash as it swept into view : the parking lot, gravel. Tall upright sign, FRANK'S BAR-B-Q AND DRINKS. Illuminated windows of a pentagonal stucco one-storey building, somewhat modern. Few cars parked. He signaled and hurtled off the highway, into the parking lot. The truck barely halted in time. A foot from the wall of the bar-b-q. Trembling, he shifted into low and drove the truck around the side of the building, out of sight, back among the garbage cans and stacks of boxes at the service entrance. Where the delivery trucks no doubt came.

After he had got out of the pick-up truck he walked back to see if it could be seen. No, not from the highway. Not by a passing car. And if anyone did ask, he had only to deny any relationship to the truck. How could they prove he had arrived in it? I walked, he would say. Or I hitch-hiked and got a lift this far with somebody who turned off at the cross street.

Pushing open the door of the bar-b-q, he entered. Maybe they'll know where the Seaside Station is, he said to himself. This is probably the place where I'm supposed to pick up the fried ham sandwich and the malted milk.

In fact, he thought, I'm positive. There are just too many people in it. Like the bus depot. The same pattern.

Most of the booths were filled with couples. And at the doughnut-shaped counter in the centre a number of men sat eating dinner or drinking. The place smelled of frying hamburgers; a jukebox roared off in the corner.

Not enough cars in the lot to explain so many people.

As yet they hadn't noticed him. He drew the door shut without entering, and then walked rapidly off, across the lot and around the side of the place, to the parked pick-up truck.

Too large. Too modern. Too lit-up. Too full of people. Is this the last stage of my mental difficulty? Suspicion of people . . . of groups and human activity, colour and life and noise. I shun them, he thought. Perversely. Seeking the dark.

Back in the darkness he felt his way up into the truck, switched on the engine, and then, with the lights still off, backed around until the truck faced the highway. During a break in the traffic he drove out into the first lane. Again he found himself in motion, heading away from town, in somebody else's truck. A gas station attendant whom he had never seen before in his life. I'm stealing his truck, he realized. But what else can I do?

I know they are conspiring against me. The two soldiers, the attendant. Plotting against me. The bus depot, too. The cab driver. Everybody. I can't trust anyone. They sent me off in this truck to get picked up by the first highway cop that came cruising by. Probably the back end of the truck lights up and reads RUSSIAN SPY. A sort of paranoid "kick me," he thought.

I'm not entering any brightly lit places. I'm not starting conversations with people I don't know. There are no genuine

strangers when it comes to me ; everybody knows me. They're either a friend or an enemy . . .

A friend, he thought. Who ? Where ? My sister ? My brother-in-law ? Neighbours ? I trust them as much as I do anybody. But not enough.

So here I am.

He continued driving. No more neon lights came into view. The land, on both sides of the highway, lay dark and lifeless. Traffic had thinned out. Only an occasional headlight flashed at him from the oncoming traffic beyond the dividing strip.

Lonely.

Glancing down, he noticed that the truck had a radio mounted on the dashboard. He recognized the slide-rule dial. The two knobs.

If I turn it on, I'll hear them talking about me.

He reached out his hand, hesitated, and then turned the radio on. The radio began to hum. Gradually the tubes warmed ; sounds, mostly static, faded in. He fiddled with the volume as he drove.

" . . . afterwards," a voice said squeakily.

" . . . not," another voice said.

" . . . my best."

" . . . okay." A series of pops.

They're calling back and forth, Ragle said to himself. The air-waves filled with alarm. Ragle Gumm eluded us ! Ragle Gumm escaped !

The voice squeaked, " . . . more experienced."

Ragle thought, Next time send a more experienced team. Bunch of amateurs.

" . . . might as well . . . no further . . ."

Might as well give up, Ragle filled in. No further use in tracking him. He's too shrewd. Too wily.

The voice squeaked, " . . . Schulmann says . . ."

That would be Commander Schulmann, Ragle said to himself. The Supreme Commander with headquarters in Geneva. Mapping the top-level secret strategy to synchronize world-wide military movements so they converge on this pick-up truck. Fleets of warships steaming toward me. Atomic cannon. The usual works.

The squeaking voice became too nerve-racking ; he shut the radio off. Like mice. Yammering mice squeaking back and forth . . . it made his flesh crawl.

According to the odometer he had gone about twenty miles. A long distance. No town. No lights. Not even traffic, now. Only the road ahead, the dividing strip to his left. The pavement showing in his headlights.

Darkness, a flatness of fields. Up above, stars.

Not even farmhouses? Signs?

God, he thought. What would happen if I broke down out here? Where am I! *Anywhere?*

Maybe I'm not moving. Caught in a between-place. Wheels of the pick-up truck spinning in gravel . . . spinning, uselessly, forever. The illusion of motion. Motor noise, wheel noise, headlights on pavement. But immobility.

And yet, he felt too uneasy to stop the truck. To get out and search around. The hell with that, he thought. At least he was safe here in the truck. Something around him. Shell of metal. Dashboard before him, seat under him. Dials, wheel, foot-pedals, knobs.

Better than the emptiness outside.

And then, far off to the right, he saw a light. And, a little later, a sign flashed in his headlights. The marker indicating an intersection. Road traveling off right and left.

Slowing, he made a right turn onto the road.

Broken, narrow pavement loomed up in his lights. The truck bounced and swayed; he slowed down. An abandoned road. Unmaintained. The front wheels of the truck dropped into a trough; he shifted into second gear and came almost to a stop. Almost broke an axle. With care he drove forward. The road twisted and began to rise.

Hills and dense growth around him, now. A tree branch under his wheels; he heard it splinter. Once a white furred creature scuttled frantically. He swerved to avoid it and the truck-wheels spun in dirt. Terrified, he wrenched the wheel. Nightmare of a few moments before . . . stuck and spinning, sinking down in the loose, crumbly soil.

Shifting into a low gear, he let the truck climb the awfully steep hill. Now the pavement had turned to packed dirt. Deep troughs, from previous vehicles. Something brushed the top of the truck; he ducked involuntarily. His headlights flashed into foliage, streaming off the road as the truck pointed toward the edge of a descent. Then the road veered sharply to the left; he forced the wheel to turn. Again the road appeared, hemmed in by shrubbery that had crept out onto it. The road became narrower; he pushed down on the brake as the truck lurched over a pothole.

On the next turn the truck missed the edge of the road. Both right wheels spun into the underbrush ; the truck spun about and he slammed down on the brakes, killing the motor. The truck leaned. He felt himself sliding away from the wheel ; clutching with his hands he managed to grasp the door handle. The truck lifted, groaned, and then came to rest, half turned over.

That's all of that, he thought to himself.

After a few moments he was able to open the door and step out.

The headlights glared from the trees and bushes. Sky above. The road almost lost as it climbed still farther up. Turning, Ragle looked back down. Far below he could see the line of lights, the highway. But no town. No settlement. The edge of the hill cut the lights off, sheared them away.

He began to walk up the road, going more by touch than sight. When his right foot struck foliage he directed himself left. The radar beam, he said to himself. Keep on course, or go off headfirst.

Suddenly he missed his footing ; stumbling, he managed to right himself. The road had leveled out. Wheezing, he halted. He had reached the top of the hill.

To his right, the light glowed. A house, set back from the road. A ranch house. Evidently occupied. Light coming from windows.

He walked toward it, up a dirt trail to a fence. Feeling with his hands he discovered a gate. At great length he slid the gate back. The trail, two deep ruts, led on toward the house. At last, after falling a number of times, he crashed against stone steps.

The house. He had got to it.

Arms extended, he climbed the steps to the porch. His hands groped about until his fingers closed over an old-fashioned bell.

He rang the bell and stood waiting, gasping for breath, shivering in the night cold.

The door opened and a drab, brown-haired, middle-aged woman looked out at him. She wore tan slacks and a checkered red and brown shirt and work shoes with high, buttoned tops. *Mrs. Keitelbein*, his mind said. It's she. But it wasn't. He stared at her and she stared back.

"Yes?" she said. Behind her, in the living room, someone else, a man, peered past her at him. "What do you want?" she said.

Ragle said, "My car broke down."

"Oh, come in," the woman said. She held the door wide for him. "Are you injured? You're alone?" She stepped out onto the porch to see if there was anyone else.

"Just me," he said. Bird's-eye maple furniture . . . a low chair, table, long bench with a portable typewriter on it. A fireplace. Wide boards, beams overhead. "Nice," he said, going toward the fireplace.

A man, holding an open book. "You can use our phone," the man said. "How far did you have to walk?"

"Not too far," he said. The man had a bland, ample face, as smooth as a boy's. He appeared to be much younger than the woman, her son perhaps. *Like Walter Keitelbein*, he thought. Striking resemblance. For a moment . . .

"You're lucky to find us," the woman said. "We're the only house up on the hill that's occupied. Everyone else is away until summer."

"I see," he said.

"We're year-round," the young man said.

The woman said, "I'm Mrs. Kesselman. And this is my son."

Ragle stared at the two of them.

"What's the matter?" Mrs. Kesselman said.

"I—thought I recognized the name," Ragle said. What did it imply? But the woman definitely was not Mrs. Keitelbein. And the young man was not Walter. So the fact that they resembled one another meant nothing.

"What were you doing out this way?" Mrs. Kesselman asked. "This is such a godforsaken mound of earth when everyone's away. I know it may sound paradoxical for me to say that, since we live up here."

Ragle said, "I was looking for a friend."

That seemed to satisfy the Kesselmans. They both nodded.

"My car left the road and turned over on one of those spiral curves," Ragle said.

"Oh dear," Mrs. Kesselman said. "How distressing. Did it slide off the road? Down into the gully?"

"No," he said. "But it'll have to be towed back up. I'd be afraid to get back into it. It might slip and go further down."

"By all means stay out of it," Mrs. Kesselman said. "There have been instances of cars sliding off the edge and going all the way to the bottom. Do you want to telephone your friend and tell him you're all right?"

Ragle said, "I don't know his number."

"Can't you look it up in the book?" the young Mr. Kesselman asked.

"I don't know his name," Ragle said. "Or even if it's a man." Or, he thought, even if he or she exists.

The Kesselmans smiled at him trustingly. Supposing, of course, that what he meant was not as cryptic as it sounded.

"Would you like to call a tow truck?" Mrs. Kesselman said. But her son spoke up.

"Nobody'll send a tow truck up here at night," he said. "We've had that out with the different garages. They won't budge."

"That's true," Mrs. Kesselman said. "Oh dear. This is a problem. We've always dreaded this happening to us. But it never has. Of course we know the road so well, after so many years."

The younger Kesselman said, "I'd be glad to drive you to your friend's place, if you have any idea where it is. Or I could drive you back down to the highway, or into town." He glanced at his mother and nodded in agreement.

"That's very kind of you," Ragle said. But he did not want to leave; he placed himself at the fireplace, warming himself and enjoying the peacefulness of the room. It seemed to him to be in some respects the most civilized house he had been in that he could remember. The prints on the walls. The lack of clutter. No useless bric-a-brac. And everything arranged with taste, the books, the furniture, the drapes . . . it satisfied his strong innate sense of order. His awareness of pattern. There exists a real esthetic balance here, he decided. That's why it's so restful.

Mrs. Kesselman waited for him to do or say something. When he continued to stand at the fireplace she said, "Would you like something to drink?"

"Yes," he said. "Thanks."

"I'll see what there is," Mrs. Kesselman said. "Excuse me." She departed from the room. Her son remained.

"Kind of cold out," her son said.

"Yes," Ragle said.

Awkwardly, the young man stuck out his hand. "My name's Garret," he said. They shook hands. "I'm in the interior decorating field."

That explained the taste shown in the room. "This looks very nice," Ragle said.

"What line are you in?" Garret Kesselman asked.

"I'm involved in newspaper work," Ragle said.

"Oh, I'll be darned," Garret said. "No kidding. That must be a fascinating business. When I was in school I took a couple of years of journalism."

Mrs. Kesselman returned with a tray on which were three small glasses and an unusual-shaped bottle. "Tennessee sourmash whiskey," she said, setting the tray down on the glass-topped coffee table. "From the oldest distillery in the country. Jack Daniel's black label."

"I never heard of it," Ragle said, "but it sounds wonderful."

"It's excellent whiskey," Garret said, handing Ragle a glass of the stuff. "Something like Canadian."

"I'm a beer drinker, usually," Ragle said. He tasted the sourmash and it seemed all right. "Fine," he said.

The three of them said nothing, then.

"It seems a bad time to be driving around looking for someone," Mrs. Kesselman said, when Ragle had finished his glass of whisky and was pouring himself a second. "Most people tackle this hill during the daylight hours." She seated herself facing him. Her son perched on the arm of the couch.

Ragle said, "I had a quarrel with my wife and I couldn't stand it any more. I had to get out."

"How unfortunate," Mrs. Kesselman said.

"I didn't even stop to pack my clothes," Ragle said. "No objective in mind, just getting away. Then I remembered this friend and I thought I might be able to hole up with him for a while, until I got my bearings. Haven't seen him in years. He probably moved away a long time ago. It's lousy when a marriage breaks up. Like the end of the world."

"Yes," Mrs. Kesselman agreed.

Ragle said, "How about letting me stay here tonight?"

They glanced at each other. Embarrassed, they both started to answer at once. The gist of it was no.

"I have to stay somewhere," Ragle said. He reached into his coat pocket and rooted about for his wallet. Getting it out he opened it up and counted his money. "I've got a couple

hundred dollars on me," he said. "I can pay you according to the inconvenience it causes you. Money for inconvenience."

Mrs. Kesselman said, "Let us have a chance to talk it over." Arising she motioned to her son. The two of them disappeared into the other room; the door shut after them.

I've got to stay here, Ragle said to himself. He poured himself another glass of the sourmash whiskey and walked back to the fireplace with it, to stand in the warmth.

That pick-up truck, he thought to himself. With its radio. It must have belonged to *them*; otherwise it wouldn't have had a radio. The boy at the Standard Station . . . he represented them.

Proof, Ragle said to himself. The radio is proof. It's not in my mind. It's a fact.

*By their fruits, ye shall know them*, he thought. And their fruits are that they communicate by radio.

The door opened. Mrs. Kesselman and her son returned. "We've talked it over," she said, sitting down on the couch across from Ragle. Her son stood by her, looking grave. "It's obvious to us that you're in distress. We'll allow you to stay, seeing that you are clearly in some unfortunate situation. But we want you to be honest with us, and we don't feel you have. There's more to your situation than you've told us so far."

Ragle said, "You're right."

The Kesselmans exchanged glances.

"I was driving around intending to commit suicide," Ragle said. "I meant to get up speed and leave the road. Crack up in a ditch. But I lost my nerve."

The Kesselmans stared at him in horror. "Oh no," Mrs. Kesselman said. She got up and started toward him. "Mr. Gumm—"

"My name's not Gumm," Ragle said. But obviously they recognized him. Had recognized him from the start.

Everybody in the universe knows me. I shouldn't be surprised. In fact I'm not surprised.

"I knew who you were," Mrs. Kesselman said, "but I didn't want to embarrass you if you didn't feel inclined to tell us."

Garret said, "I hope you don't mind sleeping down in the basement. It's not really a basement; we made it into a rumpus room a few years back. There's a bathroom and a bed down there . . . we've been using it for guests who couldn't make it back down the hill."

" You don't still intend to—do away with yourself, do you?"' Mrs. Kesselman asked. " Hasn't that left your mind ?"

" Yes," Ragle said.

With relief, she said, " I'm so glad. As a fellow contest enterer I'd take it very hard. We're all looking to you to keep winning."

### n i n e

The door chimes rang. Junie Black dropped her magazine and got up to answer it.

" Telegram for Mr. William Black," the uniformed Western Union boy said. " Sign here, please." He handed her a pencil and pad ; she signed the telegram.

Closing the door she carried the telegram to her husband. " For you," she said.

Bill Black opened the telegram, turned away so that his wife couldn't read it over his shoulder, and saw what it had to say.

CYCLE MISSED TRUCK. GUMM PASSED  
BAR-B-Q. YOUR GUESS.

Never send a boy to do a man's job, Bill Black said to himself. Your guess is as good as mine. He glanced at his wristwatch. Nine-thirty p.m. Later and later. It was too late now.

" What's it say ?" Junie asked.

" Nothing," he said. I wonder if they'll find him, he wondered. I hope so. Because if they don't some of us will be dead by this time tomorrow. God knows how many thousands of dead people. Our lives depend on Ragle Gumm. Him and his contest.

" It's a catastrophe," Junie said. " Isn't it ? I can tell by the expression on your face."

" Business," he said. " City business."

" Oh indeed ?" she said. " Don't lie to me. I'll bet it has something to do with Ragle." Suddenly she snatched the telegram away from him and rushed out of the room with it. " It is !" she cried, standing off by herself and reading the telegram. " What did you do—hire somebody to kill him ? I know he's disappeared ; I was talking to Margo on the phone and she says—"

He managed to get the telegram back from her. "You haven't got any idea what this means," he said, with mighty control.

"I can tell what it means. As soon as Margo told me Ragle had disappeared—"

"Ragle didn't disappear," he said, almost at the end of his mighty control. "He walked off."

"How do you know?"

"I know," he said.

"You know because you're responsible for his disappearance."

In a sense, Bill Black thought, she's right. I'm responsible because, when he and Vic popped out of that clubhouse, I thought they were kidding. "Okay," he said. "I'm responsible."

Her eyes changed colour. The pupils became tiny. "Oh I hate you," she said, shaking her head. "I wish I could slit your throat."

"Go ahead," he said. "Maybe it would be a good idea."

"I'm going next door," Junie said.

"Why?"

"I'm going to tell Vic and Margo that you're responsible." She hurried to the front door; he went after her and caught hold of her. "Let me go," she said, yanking away from him. "I'm going to tell them that Ragle and I are in love with each other, and if he survives your vicious—"

"Sit down," he said. "Be quiet." And then he thought again of Ragle not being around to work tomorrow's puzzle. Panic got started in him, then, and began to control him. "I feel like getting into the closet," he told his wife. "No," he said, "I feel like burrowing down into the floor. Down into the ground."

"Infantile guilt," Junie said, with derision.

Bill Black said, "Fear. Plain fear."

"You're ashamed."

"No," he said. "Infantile fear. Adult fear."

"Adult fear," Junie snorted. "There's no such thing."

"Yes there is," he said.

Garret laid a folded, fresh bath towel on the arm of the chair, and, with it, a washrag and a bar of soap in its wrapper "You'll have to get along without pyjamas," he said. "The bathroom is through this door." He opened a door, and Ragle

saw down a narrow corridor, like a ship's passage, to a cramped, closet-like bathroom at the far end.

"Fine," Ragle said. The liquor had made him sleepy. "Thanks," he said. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"There're plenty of books and magazines in the rumpus room itself," Garret said. "If you can't sleep and want to read. And there's a chess set and other games. None for one person, though."

He departed. Ragle heard his footsteps as he climbed the stairs to the first floor. The door at the top of the flight of stairs closed.

Sitting down on the bed, Ragle tugged his shoes off and let them drop to the floor. Then he caught hold of them with a finger in each, hoisted them high, and searched for a place to put them. He noticed a shelf running along the wall ; on the shelf was a lamp, a wind-up clock, and a small white plastic radio.

As soon as he saw the radio he put his shoes back on, buttoned up his shirt, and dashed out of the room to the stairs.

They almost fooled me. But they gave themselves away. He ascended two steps at a time and pushed open the door at the top. Only a minute or so had passed since Garret Kesselman had preceded him. Ragle stood in the hallway, listening. From a distance came the sounds of Mrs. Kesselman's voice.

She's getting in touch with them. Calling them on the phone or broadcasting to them. One way or another. With as little noise as possible he moved along the hall, in the direction of her voice. The hall, dark, ended at a half-open door. Light streamed out into the hall, and as he got near he saw into a dining room.

Wearing a robe and slippers, her hair up in a turban, Mrs. Kesselman was feeding a small black dog from a dish on the floor. Both she and the dog started with surprise as Ragle pushed the door open. The dog backed away and began to bark in a rapid staccato.

"Oh," Mrs. Kesselman said. "You scared me." In her hands she held a box of dog biscuits. "Did you need something?"

Ragle said, "There's a radio downstairs in my room."

"Yes," she said.

"That's how they communicate," Ragle said.

"Who?"

"They," he said. "I don't know who they are, but they're all around me. They're the ones who are after me." And, he thought, you and your son are two of them. You almost had me. Too bad you forgot to hide the radio. But probably you didn't have time.

From the hallway Garret appeared. "Everything okay?" he asked, in a worried voice.

To him his mother said, "Dear, close the door so I can talk to Mr. Gumm alone. Will you?"

"I want him in here," Ragle said. He moved toward Garret, who blinked and backed away, his arms flapping helplessly. Closing the door Ragle said, "There's no way I can tell if you've called to say I'm here. I'll have to take the chance that you haven't had time."

I don't know where else to go, he thought. Certainly not tonight.

"Now what's this about?" Mrs. Kesselman said. Stooping down, she resumed the feeding of the dog. The dog, after a few more barks at Ragle, returned to its food. "You're being pursued by a group of people and you say we're part of that group. Then that business about your 'committing suicide' is something you made up."

"I made it up," he agreed.

"Why are they pursuing you?" Garret said.

Ragle said, "Because I'm the centre of the universe. At least, that's what I've inferred from their actions. They act as if I am. I only have that to go on. They've gone to a great deal of trouble to construct a sham world around me to keep me pacified. Buildings, cars, an entire town. Natural looking, but completely unreal. The part I don't understand is the contest."

"Oh," Mrs. Kesselman said. "Your contest."

"Evidently it plays a vital role with them," Ragle said. "But I'm baffled. Do you know?"

"I don't know any more than you do," Mrs. Kesselman said. "Of course, we always hear that these big contests are rigged . . . but except for the usual rumours—"

"I mean," Ragle said, "do you know what the contest really is?"

Neither of them spoke. Mrs. Kesselman, her back to him, continued feeding the dog. Garret sat down on a chair and crossed his legs, leaning back with his hands wrapped behind his head, trying to appear calm.

"Do you know what I'm really doing every day?" Ragle said. "When I'm supposedly plotting where the little green man will show up next? I must be doing something else. They know, but I don't."

Both the Kesselmans were silent.

"Had you called?" Ragle asked them.

Garret quivered with embarrassment. Mrs. Kesselman seemed shaken, but she continued to feed the dog.

"Can I look through the house?" Ragle said.

"Surely," Mrs. Kesselman said, straightening up. "Look, Mr. Gumm. We're doing the best we can to accomodate you. But—" With a wild gesture she burst out, "Honestly, you've got us both so upset we hardly know what we're doing. We never saw you before in our lives. Are you crazy—is that it? Maybe you are; you certainly are acting as if you are. I wish now you hadn't come here; I wish—" She hesitated. "Well, I started to say I wished you'd gone off the road with your car. It isn't fair to us to cause us all this trouble."

"That's right," Garret murmured.

Am I making a mistake? Ragle asked himself.

"Explain the radio," he said aloud.

"There's nothing to explain," Mrs. Kesselman said. "It's an ordinary five-tube radio that we got right after World War Two. It's been down there for years. I don't even know if it works." Now she seemed angry. Her hands trembled and her face had become strained, pinched with fatigue. "Everybody owns a radio. Two or three of them."

Ragle opened each of the doors that led off the dining room. One of them opened onto a storage closet, with shelves and bins. He said, "I want to look around the house. Get in here, so I won't have to worry about what you're doing while I look." In the lock there was a key.

"Please," Mrs. Kesselman began, glaring at him and almost inarticulate.

"Just for a few minutes," he said.

They glanced at each other. Mrs. Kesselman made a sign of resignation, and then they walked wordlessly into the closet. Ragle closed it and threw the bolt. He put the key in his pocket.

Now he felt better.

From within the closet Garret's voice was distinctly audible. ". . . face it—he's a nut."

Ragle said, "I'm not a nut. I've watched this thing grow step by step. At least, I've become aware of it step by step."

Mrs. Kesselman said to him through the closet door, "Look, Mr. Gumm. It's clear to us that you believe what you say. But don't you see what you're doing? Because you believe everyone's against you, you force everyone to be against you."

"Like ourselves," Garret said.

There was a lot in what they said. Ragle, uncertainly, said, "I can't take any chances."

"You have to take a chance with someone," Mrs. Kesselman said. "Or you can't live."

Ragle said, "I'll look through the house and then I'll make up my mind."

The woman's voice, controlled and civilized, went on, "At least call your family and tell them you're all right. So they won't worry about you. They're probably quite upset."

"You should let us call them," Garret said. "So they wouldn't phone the police or something."

Ragle left the dining room. First he inspected the living room. Nothing seemed out of order. What did he intend to find? The same old problem . . . he wouldn't know until he found it. And perhaps even then he wouldn't be sure.

On the wall, beyond a small spinet piano, hung a telephone, a bright pink plastic phone with a curly plastic cord. And upright, in the bookcase, the phone book. He lifted the book out.

It was the same phone book as the one Sammy had found in the vacant lot. He opened it. Written, in pencil, red crayon, ball-point pen and fountain pen, were numbers and names on the blank first page. Addresses, jotted notations of dates, times, events . . . the current phone book, in use in this house by these people. Walnut, Sherman, Kentfield, Devonshire numbers.

The number on the wall phone itself was a Kentfield number.

So that settled that.

Carrying the book he strode back through the house, into the dining room. He got out the key and unlocked the closet door, swinging it wide.

The closet was empty. A large hole had been neatly cut in the rear wall, a still-warm rim of wood and plaster through which showed one of the bedrooms. They had cut a passage out in a matter of minutes. On the floor, by the hole, lay two

tiny drill-like points ; one had been bent, damaged and scored. The wrong size. Too small. And the other, probably not tried ; they had found the right size and finished the job, scrambled out in such haste that they had forgotten these parts of the cutting-tool.

Holding the drill-like points in the palm of his hand he saw that they were like nothing he had ever seen before. In all his life.

While they had talked reasonably and rationally, they had been cutting through the back wall.

I'm hopelessly outclassed, he said to himself. I might as well give up.

He returned to the living room. This time he opened drawers and cupboards and poked into the ordinary objects, such as the television set in the corner.

On top of the television set, mounted in a mahogany frame, was a tape recorder. He snapped the switch, and a reel of tape, already on the mechanism, began to move. After a moment or so the screen of the television set lit up. The tape, he realized, was for video use, as well as audio. Standing back he watched the screen.

On the television screen appeared Ragle Gumm, first a front view and then a side view. Ragle Gumm strolled along a tree-lined residential street, past parked cars, lawns. Then a close-up of him, full-face.

From the speaker of the TV set a voice said, "This is Ragle Gumm."

On the screen Ragle Gumm now sat in a deck-chair in the back yard of a house, wearing a Hawaiian sports shirt and shorts.

"You will hear an excerpt of his conversational manner," the voice from the speaker said. And then Ragle heard his own voice. ". . . get home ahead of you I'll do it," Ragle Gumm said. "Otherwise you can do it tomorrow. Is that okay?"

They have me down in black and white, Ragle thought. In colour, as a matter of fact.

He stopped the tape. The image remained, inert. Then he clicked the switch off, and the image dwindled to a spot of brightness and at last vanished entirely.

No wonder everybody recognizes me. They've been trained.

When I start to imagine I'm crazy I'll remember this tape machine. This training-programme of identification with me as the topic.

I wonder how many tapes like this are sitting in how many machines in how many homes. Over how large an area. Every house that I ever passed. Every street. Every town, perhaps.

The entire earth?

He heard, from far off, the noise of an engine. It started him into motion.

Not long, he realized. He opened the front door, and the noise increased. In the darkness below him, twin lights flashed and then were temporarily broken off.

But what is it for? he wondered. Who are they?

*What are things really like? I've got to see . . .*

Running through the house he passed one object after another, from one room to the next. Furnishings, books, food in the kitchen, personal articles in drawers, clothes hanging in closets . . . what would tell him the most?

At the back porch he stopped. He had reached the end of the house. A washing machine, mop hanging from a rack, package of Dash soap, a stack of magazines and newspapers.

Reaching into the stack he dragged out a handful, dropping them, opening them at random.

The date on a newspaper made him stop searching; he stood holding it.

May 10, 1997.

Almost forty years in the future.

His eyes took in the headlines. Meaningless jumble of isolated trivia: a murder, bond issue to raise funds for parking lots, death of famous scientist, revolt in Argentina.

And, near the bottom, the headline:

#### VENUSIAN ORE DEPOSITS OBJECT OF DISPUTE

Litigation in the International system of courts concerning the ownership of property on Venus . . . he read as rapidly as he could, and then he tossed the newspaper down and pawed through the magazines.

A copy of *Time*, dated April 7, 1997. Rolling it up he stuck it in his trouser pocket. More copies of *Time*; he rooted through them, opening them and trying to devour the articles all at once, trying to grasp and retain something. Fashions, bridges, paintings, medicine, ice hockey—everything, the world of the future laid out in careful prose. Concise summaries of each branch of the society that had not yet come into existence. . . .

That *had* come into existence. That existed now.

This was a current magazine. This *was* the year 1997. Not 1959.

From the road outside, the noise of a vehicle stopping caused him to grab up the rest of the magazines. An armload . . . he started to open the back door, to the yard outside.

Voices. In the yard men moved ; a light flashed. His armload of magazines struck the door and most of them tumbled to the porch. Kneeling down, he gathered them up.

"There he is," a voice said, and the light flicked in his direction, dazzling him. He swung so that his back was to it ; lifting up one of the copies of *Time* he stared at the cover.

On the cover of *Time*, dated January 14, 1996, was his picture. A painting, in colour. With the words underneath it:

### RAGLE GUMM—MAN OF THE YEAR

Sitting down on the porch he opened the magazine and found the article. Photographs of him as a baby. His mother and father. Him as a child in grammar school. He turned the pages frantically. Him as he was now, after World War Two or whatever war it had been that he had fought in . . . military uniform, himself smiling back at the camera.

And then a scenic sprawl, the sharp city-like spires and minarets of an industrial installation.

The magazine was plucked from his hands. He looked up and saw to his amazement, that the men lifting him up and away from the porch had on familiar drab coveralls.

"Watch out for that gate," one of them said.

He glimpsed dark trees, men stepping on flower beds, crushing plants under their shoes. Flashlights swinging across the stone path out of the yard, to the road. And, in the road, trucks parked with their motors noisily running, headlights on. Olive-green service trucks, ton and a half. Familiar, too. Like the drab coveralls.

City trucks. City maintenance men.

And then one of the men held something to his face, a bubble of plastic that the man compressed with his fingers. The bubble split apart and became fumes.

Held between four of the men, Ragle Gumm could do nothing but breathe in the fumes. A flashlight poured yellow fumes and glare into his face ; he shut his eyes.

"Don't hurt him," a voice murmured. "Be careful with him."

Under him the metal of the truck had a cold, damp quality. As if, he thought, he had been loaded into a refrigerator tank. Produce, from the countryside, to be hauled into town. To be ready for the next day's market.

### ten

Hearty morning sunlight filled his bedroom with a white glare. He put his hand over his eyes, feeling sick.

"I'll pull down the shades," a voice said. Recognizing the voice he opened his eyes. Victor Nielson stood at the windows, pulling down the shades.

"I'm back," Ragle said. "I didn't get anywhere. Not a step." He remembered the running, the scrambling uphill, through shrubbery. "I got up high," he said. "Almost to the top. But then they rolled me back." Who? he wondered. He said aloud, "Who brought me back here?"

Vic said, "A burly taxi driver who must have weighed three hundred pounds. He carried you right in the front door and set you down on the couch." After a moment he added, "It cost you or me, depending on who foots the bill, eleven dollars."

"Where did they find me?"

"In a bar," Vic said.

"What bar?"

"I never heard of it. Out at the end of town. The north end. The industrial end, by the tracks and the freight yards."

"See if you can remember the name of the bar," Ragle said. It seemed important to him; he did not know why.

"I can ask Margo," Vic said. "She was up; we both were up. Just a minute." He left the room. After a moment or so, Margo appeared at the end of his bed.

"It was a bar called Frank's Bar-B-Q," she said.

"Thanks," Ragle said.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"Better."

"Can I fix you something bland to eat?"

"No," he said. "Thanks."

Vic said, "You really tanked up. Not on beer. Your pockets were full of shoestring potatoes."

"Anything else?" Ragle said. There was supposed to be something else; he had a memory of stuffing something

valuable into them, something that he wanted vitally to keep and bring back.

"Just a paper napkin from Frank's Bar-B-Q," Margo said.

"And a lot of change. Quarters and dimes."

"Maybe you were making phone calls," Vic said.

"I was," he said. "I think." Something about a phone. A phone book. "I remember a name," he said. "Jack Daniels."

Vic said, "That was the cab driver's name."

"How do you know?" Margo asked him.

"Ragle kept calling the cab driver that," Vic said.

"What about city maintenance trucks?" Ragle said.

"You didn't say anything about them," Margo said. "But it's easy to see why you might have them on your mind."

"Why?" he said.

She raised the window shade. "They've been out there since sunup, since before seven o'clock. The din probably affected your subconscious and got into your thoughts."

Lifting himself up, Ragle looked out the window. Parked at the far curb were two olive-green city maintenance trucks. A crew of city workmen in their drab coveralls had started digging up the street; the racket of their trip hammers jarred him, and he realized that he had been hearing the sound for some time.

"Looks like they're there to stay," Vic said. "Must be a break in the pipe."

"It always makes me nervous when they start digging up the street," Margo said. "I'm always afraid they'll just walk off and leave it dug up. Not finish it."

"They know what they're doing," Vic said. Waving goodbye to Margo and Ragle, he set off for work.

Later, after he had got shakily out of bed, washed and shaved and dressed, Ragle Gumm wandered into the kitchen and fixed himself a glass of tomato juice and a soft-boiled egg on unbuttered toast.

Seated at the table he sipped some of the coffee that Margo had left on the stove. He did not feel like eating. From a distance he could hear the drapapapapapa of the trip hammers. I wonder how long that'll be going on, he asked himself.

He lit a cigarette and then picked up the morning paper. Vic or Margo had brought it in and laid it on the chair by the table, where he would find it.

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The texture of the paper repelled him. He could hardly bear to hold it in his hands.

Folding the first sheets back he glanced over the puzzle page. There, as usual, the names of winners. His name, in its special box. In all its glory.

"How does the contest look today?" Margo asked, from the other room. Wearing toreador pants, and a white cotton shirt of Vic's, she had started to polish the television set.

"About the same," he said. The sight of his name on the newspaper page made him restless and uncomfortable, and his first nausea of the morning returned. "Funny business," he said to his sister. "Seeing your name in print. All of a sudden it can be nerve-racking. A shock."

"I've never seen my name in print," she said. "Except in some of those articles about you."

Yes, he thought. Articles about me. "I'm pretty important," he said, putting the paper down.

"Oh you are," Margo agreed.

"I have the feeling," he said, "that what I do affects the human race."

She straightened up and stopped polishing. "What a peculiar thing to say. I don't really see—" She broke off. "After all, a contest is only a contest."

Going into his room, he began setting up his charts, graphs, tables and machines. An hour or so later he had got deep into the ordeal of solving the day's puzzle.

At noon, Margo rapped on the closed door. "Ragle," she said, "can you be interrupted? Just say you can't if you can't."

He opened the door, glad of a break.

"Junie Black wants to talk to you," Margo said. "She swears she'll stay only a minute; I told her you hadn't finished." She made a motion, and Junie Black appeared from the living room. "All dressed up," Margo said, eyeing her.

"I'm going downtown shopping," Junie explained. She had on a red knit wool suit, stockings and high heels, and a shorty coat over her shoulders; her hair was done up and she had on make-up, a good deal of it. Her eyes seemed extra dark, and her lashes long, dramatic. "Close the door," she said to Ragle, stepping into his room. "I want to talk to you."

He shut the door.

"Listen," Junie said. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," he said.

"I know what happened to you." She put her hands on his shoulders and then she drew away from him with a quake of anguish. "Damn him!" she said. "I told him I'd leave him if he did anything to you."

"Bill?" he asked.

"He's responsible. He had you followed and spied on; he hired some private detectives." She paced about the room, tense and smouldering. "They beat you up, didn't they?"

"No," he said. "I don't think so."

She pondered that. "Maybe they just wanted to scare you."

"I don't think this has anything to do with your husband," Ragle said hesitantly. "Or with you."

Shaking her head, Junie said, "I know it does. I saw the telegram he got. When you were missing he got this telegram—he didn't want me to see it, but I grabbed it away from him. I remember exactly what it said. It was about you. A report on you."

Ragle said, "What did it say?"

For a moment she squeezed together her faculties. Then, fervently, she said, "It said, 'Sighted missing truck. Gumm passed barbecue. Your next move.'"

"You're sure?" he said, aware of her vagaries.

"Yes," she said. "I memorized it before he got it back."

City trucks, he thought. Outside, in the street, the olive-drab trucks had not left. The men still worked away at the pavement; they had quite a stretch of it dug up, by now.

"Bill has no contact with maintenance, has he?" he asked. "He doesn't dispatch the service trucks, does he?"

"I don't know what he does down at the water company," Junie said. "And I don't care, Ragle. Do you hear that? I don't care. I wash my hands of him." Suddenly she ran toward him and put her arms around him; hugging him she said loudly in his ear, "Ragle, I've made up my mind. This thing, this awful criminal vengeance business of his, finishes it forever. Bill and I are through. Look." She tugged off the glove of her left hand and waved her hand before his face.

"Do you see?"

"No," he said.

"My wedding ring. I'm not wearing it." She put her glove back on. "I came over here to tell you that, Ragle. Do you remember when you and I lay out on the grass together, and you read poetry to me and told me you loved me?"

"Yes," he said.

"I don't care what Margo says or anybody says," Junie said. "I have an appointment at two-thirty this afternoon with an attorney. I'm going to see about leaving Bill. And then you and I can be together for the rest of our lives, and nobody can interfere. And if he tries any more of his strong-arm criminal tactics, I'll call the police."

Gathering up her purse, she opened the door to the hall.

"You're leaving?" he asked, somewhat dazed to find himself now in the ebb of the whirlwind.

"I have to get downtown," she said. She glanced up and down the hall and then she made a pantomime, in his direction, of ardent kissing. "I'll try to phone you later today," she whispered, leaning toward him. "And tell you what the lawyer said." The door snapped shut after her, and he heard her heels against the floor as she rushed off. Then, outside, a car started up. She had gone.

"What was all that?" Margo said, from the kitchen.

"She's upset," he said vaguely. "Fight with Bill."

Margo said, "If you're important to the whole human race you ought to be able to do better than her."

"Did you tell Bill Black I had gone off?" he said.

"No," she said. "But I told her. She showed up here, after you had gone. I told her I was too worried about where you were to give a darn what she had to say. Anyhow, I think it was just an excuse on her part to see you; she didn't really want to talk to me." Drying her hands on a paper towel she said, "She looked quite nice, just now. She really is physically attractive. But she's so juvenile. Like some of the little girls Sammy has for his playmates."

He barely heard what she was telling him. His head ached and he felt more sick and confused than before. Echoes of the night . . .

Outside, the city maintenance crew leaned on their shovels, smoked cigarettes, and seemed to be keeping in the vicinity of the house.

Are they there to spy on me? Ragle wondered.

He felt a strong, reflexive aversion to them; it bordered on fear. And he did not know why. He tried to think back, to remember what had happened to him, what he had done and what had been done to him. The olive-green trucks . . . the running and crawling. An attempt, somewhere along the line, to hide. And something valuable that he had found, but which had slipped or been taken away . . .



Dear Sir,

Mr. Haller's letter in your November issue has stimulated me to say several things :

(1) I gave up *Astounding* after "about 10 years" more-or-less regular reading because of its psi-mania.

(2) May we have a short article about Dr. Rhine's mathematics ?

(3) "Pseudopath" in your August-September issue seems to open up a new and fruitful field for authors.

(4) Hear, hear ! to including "time-travel" in the junk-heap. Asimov has cunningly done just this in *The End of Eternity* ! In order to "travel" in one dimension there must be a "time" dimension at right angles to it. If you suppose another world in which one of our "space" dimensions is their "time" dimension, then they could "travel" relative to our time but, apart from many geometrical difficulties, such a world would be left behind in the Universe by the simple movements of Earth, Sun and Galaxy at tens of thousands of miles an hour. I do not exclude ingenuity with four or more dimensions but to "travel" in "time" in a straightforward sense is simply a contradiction in terms.

(5) I should like more stories of the "galactic empire" type—implying that the speed of light should not be accepted as a limit. We must not lose confidence in ourselves as engineers in the best sense.

R. C. Abel, F.B.I.S., A.F.R.Ae.S.  
Kingston-on-Thames.

Dear Mr. Carnell,

In the November issue, a letter by Mr. Haller was published, in which he rejected all forms of *psi* power stories.

Perhaps he doesn't realise that this is only fiction and not fact. After all if science fiction authors were to limit their stories to that which could be proven as perfectly feasible, what could the more imaginative readers look for in s-f ?

The largest portion of stories would have to be put in the S.F.A. class.

What do we look for in science fiction magazines? Good Characterisation? Plotting? Setting? Or something out of the ordinary lines of stories. Something different from Westerns and Crime stories.

Between the three magazines : *New Worlds*, *Science Fantasy*, and *Science Fiction Adventures*, I think you cater very well for all tastes.

After all what magazine can honestly say its readers are completely satisfied by every story it publishes.

Admittedly a few of the stories are not as good as expected, but on the whole the majority of *New Worlds'* stories make good reading.

D. Suttar.

*Peterhead.*

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